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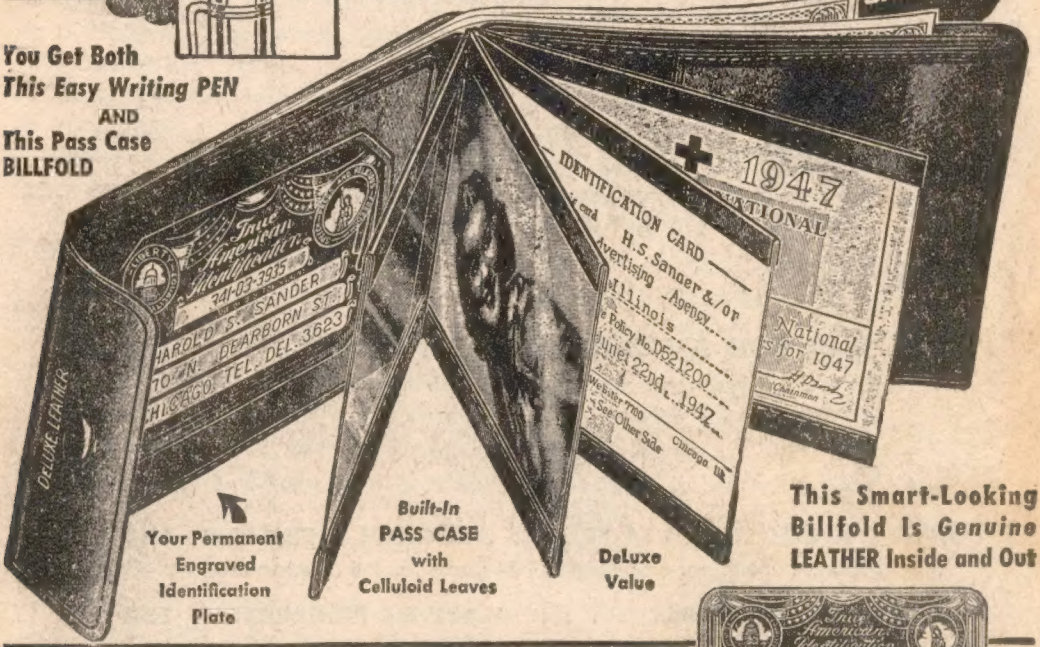

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VOL. 1, No. 1 FALL, 1947 Price 25c

A Complete Novel

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Back from Yuma Prison, Homesteader Jeff Tennant barges into a roaring war at Bunchgrass Basin that enlists all his fighting might!

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The true story of that broiling, roiling saga, the Lincoln County War

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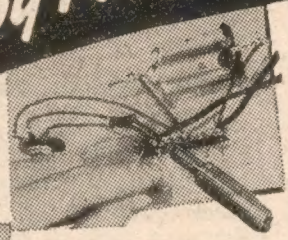

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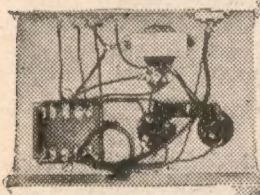

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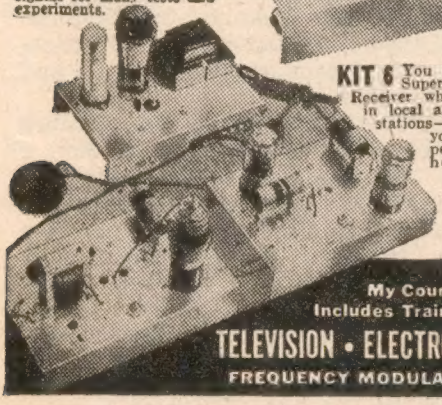

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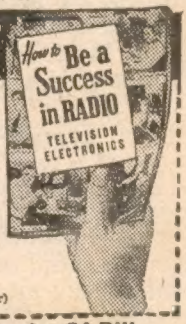

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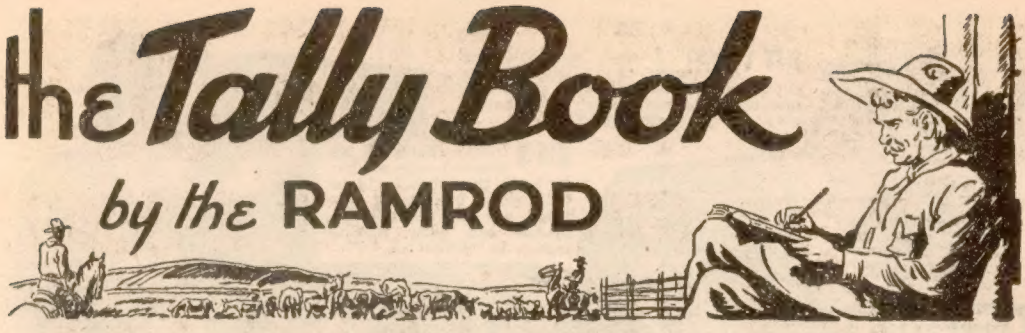

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Comedy and tragedy, drama and pathos elbowed each other on its pages in the crabbed scrawls of men whose fingers were more accustomed to rope and branding iron than to a stub pencil. It was a vivid cross-section of the brilliant kaleidoscope that was the West of old.

So now we open the Tally Book on the first issue of GIANT WESTERN. We'll be modest. We'll say we hope you find it as stirring and colorful as the way of life from which its stories are drawn. It is the biggest Western magazine, with the most reading matter, in the history of publishing. For two-bits, a well known Western sum, you get 196 pages, room enough for us to include a full book-length novel, one or more novelets, depending upon their length, and several short stories plus selected features.

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Take a quick preview of the featured novel for our next issue, SHOWDOWN TRAIL, by Jim Mayo. Here's a solid book-length job that typifies all the color and action of the West, set amidst the dazzling scenery of vast plains and mile-high, snow-capped peaks. This is the West of adventure and romance, the free wild life that called so many people out of the narrow confines of their lives to risk all they had in a search for the new.

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Out of the East crawled a wagon train carrying its freight of hopeful humanity. The vision was in them yet, the golden promise of the distant hills, offering a land of milk and honey, the fair and flowering land sought by all wandering peoples of whatever time and whatever place.

No hardship could seem too great, no trail too long, no mountains impassable when the vision was upon them. It was always and forever the same when men saw the future opening beyond the hills where the sun slept, yet this time the vision must hold meaning, this time the end of the trail must bring realization, for they had brought their women and children along.

Even Rock Bannon of the sombre green eyes and the granite will had a vision. It was wilder and freer than the dreams of the simple farmers in the ox-drawn wagons, for he came of a wilder strain. But there was gentleness in it, too, gentleness shaped by the thought of Sharon Crockett, whose hair was a golden flame as she sat on the driver's seat of her father's wagon.

"Stay away from her," Mulholland,

(Continued on page 8)

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

the train boss, told him. "She's not your kind. You're a killer!"

"You didn't seem to mind my killing Indians," Bannon said, sarcastically. "You killed a few yourself."

That was different, Mulholland insisted. Killing Indians when the train was attacked was one thing. Killing white men was another.

"You're new to the West," Bannon told him. "There's white men out here need killin' worse than Indians. In fact, I'm not so sure those Indians jumped us without help."

An Ugly Conflict

And there came into the open the ugly conflict which seethed under the surface of the apparently homogenous wagon train.

The farmers were accepting advice on trails and routes from Morton Harper, who had promised them a better trail, free of Indians, free of snow-choked mountain passes, if they took his directions.

Bannon, who had joined the train later, had warned of an Indian Chief called Buffalo Hide. Harper insisted his range was further north. Bannon had been right, they had been attacked by Indians, but had beaten the hostiles off. The men agreed Bannon had been an important help in that fight, but they felt the Indian attack had been an accident, that Harper had otherwise shown himself right about the trail and that Bannon was picking on him unjustly. Moreover, Harper had lent them supplies or money as needed.

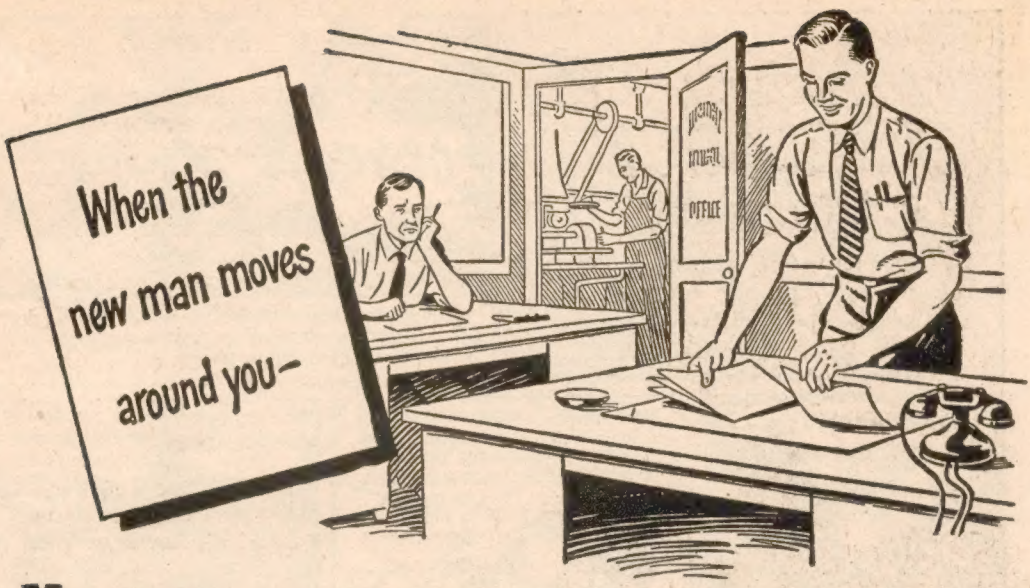
What was Harper's game? Bannon asked himself that question over and over as he rode, practically an outcast, on the fringes of the train. He was up to something, for his advice was doctored and his liberal loans to the émigrés smacked of ulterior motives.

The Long Valley

The answer came when the train reached Bishop's Valley.

"You should see it," Bannon told Sharon. "You go down a deep gorge along a roaring mountain stream and

(Continued on page 188)



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"I came to kill a hog," said Tennant. "A hog just about your size and shape" (Chap. VII)

Rebels RIDE PROUDLY

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LESLIE ERNENWEIN

THIS was late autumn, with Tonto Flats turned tawny by sun-cured grama grass. Mesquite beans in the thickets along Commissary Creek were brittle dry, so that the slightest breeze set them to rattling.

It occurred to Jeff Tennant that the beans were the exact ivory color they'd been the last time he had crossed this creek, and that the same wheel-scarred boulders protruded above the water here at the ford. While his sorrel gelding drank leisurely, Tennant recalled the occasion of that crossing three years ago. He had been driving his first beef gather to Quadrille, twenty fat steers which carried his Roman Four brand.

A whimsical smile loosened Tennant's lips, changing his angular face and giving it a youthfulness that was in keeping with his twenty-eight years. But the smile didn't change his gray eyes; it didn't touch them at all.

"Three years," he said. He cursed, and built a cigarette, and said again: "Three years."

Sitting so, with the brim of his sweat-stained hat cuffed back and his long black hair merging with the four-day stubble of whiskers that shagged his jaws, Jeff Tennant looked like a saddle tramp. He wore a faded cotton shirt

which had once been blue; his riding pants showed bachelor patches in both knees, and his brush-scabbed boots had run-over heels. But his gun-belt and holster were new, the tooled leather store yellow and store stiff.

When his horse finished drinking, Tennant rode on across the ford. He was topping the north bank when a girl rode out of the brush so near that he recognized her at once. She was Leona Bell, whose father owned one of the two large ranches in Bunchgrass Basin.

Tennant discarded his cigarette. He showed her a frugal courtesy by nudging his hat brim. "Howdy, ma'am," he said.

Leona Bell nodded acknowledgment. She halted her horse and sat with both gloved hands on saddle-horn in the contemplative fashion of a cattle buyer calculating the weight of a steer. Sunlight gave her brown eyes an amber shine. Her jet-black hair, showing beneath the brim of a gray Stetson, accentuated the pallor of a composed, cameo-smooth face that now had an upchinned tilt, so that she seemed to be looking down at him.

Tennant thought, "She always was prouder than seven peacocks," and recalled that she had attended a fashionable Eastern school. Now, he guessed, she was showing him how folks in Bunchgrass Basin treated an ex-convict.

A DEVIL-MAY-CARE grin creased Tennant's stubbled cheeks. "Take a good look," he said brashly, and, deliberately regarding her curves, added, "While I do the same."

He thought that would end her silence. And her appraisal. But it didn't. She glanced at his new gun gear, at the sack of provisions tied behind his saddle, and at the brand on his bronc's left shoulder.

"Just riding through?" she finally asked.

Tennant understood now that she hadn't recognized him. Which seemed peculiar, until he remembered how few times they had met and how casual those meetings had been, for the Bells had never been overly sociable with folks who lived in the Tailholt Hills.

"Well?" she asked, with cool arrogance.

"Make any difference to you, one way or the other?" Tennant inquired.

"Perhaps."

She considered him for a moment longer and asked, "Are you as tough as you look?"

"Yeah," Tennant told her, not smiling nor changing the brash tone of his voice. "I'm so tough I scare myself, almost."

She still sat with her gloved hands on the saddle-horn and with the same upchinned tilt to her head. But now there was a reflective expression in her eyes that made them seem less arrogant.

"I could use a tough man," she announced.

"So?" Tennant prompted, more curious than he cared to reveal.

"Ever hear of the Bar Bell outfit?" she asked, and when he nodded, she said, "I'm boss of Bar Bell. I'm looking for a ramrod."

What, Tennant wondered, had happened to her father, and to Jules Huffmeyer, the crusty old ramrod who had threatened to shoot any Tailholt Hills cowman caught slow-elking Bar Bell beef?

"Are you interested?" Leona asked.

Tennant shook his head.

"I'll pay your price," she offered.

"You haven't got my price," Tennant said flatly, and saw her swift anger.

She leaned forward in the saddle, her

right hand reaching out as if to grasp his sleeve.

"Why?" she demanded. "Why won't you work for me?"

All her cool aloofness vanished. Some inward heat warmed her eyes and stained her cheeks, giving her face an intense, glowing beauty that astonished Jeff Tennant. It lasted for only a moment, the warmth fading from her eyes as swiftly as it had come, but in that brief interval Tennant saw that beneath the thin shield of her aloofness was this capacity for passion.

JEFF TENNANT

He was tempted to tell her his name. She would know then why he wouldn't work for the Bar Bell, or for any other outfit in Bunchgrass Basin.

But all he said was, "I've got reasons a-plenty."

Then he rode past her, quartering toward the Tailholt Hills, and not stopping until he reached a bluff at the northern edge of Tonto Flats. Here he halted, contemplating the familiar run of country ahead of him.

The lower hills looked exactly as he remembered them—like dusty elephants asleep in the sun. Above them the timbered slopes rose in rough-and-tumble disorder, and beyond, veiled in autumn haze, was the high wall of Dragoon Divide.

All the contours of this land suited Tennant, and pleased him, in the way a man is pleased by the build of a race horse, or a well-made woman. And because he knew every nook and cranny of the Tailholts, Tennant saw more than his eyes beheld—grassy, tree-bordered meadows and bald benches and long, shaded corridors in the pines. But clearer than any of these was the picture of his homestead cabin with a Roman Four burned on its door.

"Wonder if it's still there," Tennant mused. "Pine logs burn easy."

A tolerable amount of toil had gone into the building of that cabin; tedious, painstaking toil which had turned hand-hewed logs and timbers into the best constructed home in the Tailholt Hills. He had hauled adobe dirt all the way from Bent Elbow Canyon, had mixed it with straw and tramped it into chinking mud with his bare feet. He had built a stout, tight cabin, and his best girl had called it his "Shack of Dreams."

The need for revenge was like a malignant growth inside Jeff Tennant. It had shaped all his thoughts for three awful years in Yuma Prison. But now the idea of eating supper at his own table and sleeping under his own roof whetted a new eagerness in him.

He thought: "I can be home before dark—if I've still got a home."

PICTURES in his mind kept Tennant company as he rode, and some of them were like laughing companions. There was the picture of a poker game the night he had won twelve hundred dollars from Big Sid Stromberg. He'd

had less than twenty dollars in his pocket when he had gone into the Palace Saloon and Stromberg invited him to try his luck at head-to-head stud. Old Dame Fortune had been with him all the way that night. He had won the first five pots, and after that there had been no stopping him. Next morning he had paid off a thousand-dollar loan note with interest at Morgan's Mercantile.

Then there was the picture of Jane Medwick, a tall and supple girl whose eyes were the blue-gray color of campfire smoke. He had endeavored to discard that picture at Yuma, many times, but it was with him now, making him remember the slow sweetness of her smile, the yielding cushion of her lips, the way she closed her eyes when he kissed her.

For a time, Jeff Tennant's thoughts ran full and free and he was glad to be riding home with the good smell of dust and leather and horse sweat in his nostrils. But when he came close to the hills, Tennant scanned the cattle he passed with mounting wonderment. This had always been Bar Bell range, yet most of the cow brutes he saw were slat-ribbed Sonora steers wearing Tate Usher's TU above a vented "bug" brand.

"So that's it," he reflected. "That's why Leona Bell is looking for a tough ramrod."

Recalling that her pompous, peace-loving father had been a member of the jury which had convicted him of brand-blotting three years ago, Tennant took a cynical satisfaction in the knowledge that Usher was now crowding Bar Bell.

The trail dipped occasionally, crossing dry washes and winding through rock-studded canyons, but always it gained altitude and by midafternoon Tennant rode into a stand of high-

branched timber. Pine needles muffled the tramp of his horse here, and the rarefied air carried the fine odors of pitch and pine and moist, tree-shaded earth.

When he crossed a grassy meadow, Tennant counted upward of twenty grazing steers, over half of which wore TU brands. He tallied five Lazy P's, belonging to Ben Petty whose bachelor camp was beyond the next ridge. Presently he passed an old brindle cow with a brindle calf, both wearing his Roman Four brand.

"Someone's been good enough to rep for me!" Tennant thought instantly.

The knowledge both pleased and surprised him, for he had expected his calves would go unbranded and become

mavericks—fair game for any man with a rope and running iron.

As Tennant topped the ridge above Petty's place, the sound of gunfire drifted up to him. He quickly crossed the crest and, halting on the north rim, listened to another burst of shooting. Six reports in rapid succession. He waited out an interval of silence. When the gun blasts came again he reckoned their origin as being near the base of this ridge.

Counting six shots, he said: "Sounds like target practise."

He rode down the slope and soon glimpsed Ben Petty walking away from a flour sack target tied to a tree. The lanky homesteader stepped off ten paces, whirled and fired at the target. Then he peered at the untouched circle in the flour sack and cursed dejectedly.

"Practise makes perfect," Tennant called, announcing his presence.

Petty flinched. His homely, high-beaked face reddened. "So they finally turned you loose," he said. He came over to the trail, not offering to shake hands, and added, "All the danged practise in the world wouldn't make me perfect."

"Takes time," Tennant said. He drew his gun and snapped two shots at the flour sack, and when Petty stared at the twin holes near the circle's center, Tennant explained, "I couldn't do that a couple months ago, Ben. I've practised every day since I got out of jail."

Petty eyed him sharply. "So you're planning to kill Tate Usher," he said, in the slow way of a man thinking aloud.

"At the right time, and in the right place," Tennant said.

"But how about Idaho Cleek?" Petty asked. "He's always close by his boss. How you goin' to fight Usher without fightin' Cleek too?"

Tennant shrugged, having found no answer to that problem.

Presently he said, "Saw a fresh branded brindle calf back yonder. Who's been repping for Roman Four?"

"Me," Petty muttered. He put his rope-calloused fingers to building a cigarette and added, "Might of missed more'n I branded."

THE thought came to Tennant that Ben hadn't changed. He'd never offered more than a grudging civility, which was all he offered now. But Ben had taken the trouble to brand Roman Four calves.

"I'm much obliged to you" Tennant said, "and I'll return the favor, first chance I get." Then he asked, "What

happened to Claude Bell?"

"Died," Petty reported. "Guess he worried hisself to death. Two dry years burned up the graze. Commissary Creek shrunk to a trickle and things got awful tough. When it finally came up a few rains Tate Usher imported a big herd of Mexican steers and crowded the whole danged range. There's TU stuff strung out all the way from Tonto Flats to the Rio Pago, and them starved steers is gobblin' three bites to every one our critters take. They'll have it ate smooth as the palm of a tinhorn's hand in another couple months. Then we'll have two choices—we can sell out to Usher at his price, or borrow money to buy feed, and go busted. Either way we lose and Usher wins." Then he asked, "You remember what a nice outfit Joe Barlow had?"

Tennant nodded.

"Well, Joe quit the cow business. He sold out to Usher and bought the Senate Hotel in Quadrille. Now his wife works in the kitchen, Rose waits on table, young Billy is swamper and Joe drinks up the profits at Big Sid Stromberg's bar."

"A fine way to make a living," Tennant muttered, and remembered that Petty had been Rose Barlow's bashful admirer three years ago. "Why did Joe sell out?"

"On account of what happened to Mac Menafee, I guess. You knew Mac was on Usher's payroll, didn't you? Well, he was supposed to homestead that section betwixt the Pot Holes and Bandoleer Breaks for Usher. But he got hisself married to a schoolteacher and when the time came to turn the place over to TU, Mac decided he wanted to keep it—his wife havin' a baby on the way, and all. He borrowed money to pay Usher back the wages he'd drawed whilst he was provin' up on the section, but Usher wouldn't take it. He said a deal was a deal.

"Six months later Idaho Cleek crowded Menafee into a fight on Main Street and killed him deader'n a mackerel. Mac's widow went back to Texas and when the county put the place up at tax sale, Usher bid it in. Joe Barlow saw Cleek kill Menafee. He told me Mac had his gun half raised before Cleek made his grab. He said Cleek's draw was faster'n the flick of a toad's tongue. I guess Joe was thinkin' about that when he sold his ranch."

"Shouldn't wonder," Tennant said. "Is Jules Huffmeyer still strawboss at the Bar Bell?"

"Yeah, but a bronc fell on him a month ago and Jules ain't doin' so good. Leona stopped by today. Said she was goin' after Doc Medwick because Jules' busted ribs ain't mendin' like they should."

Tennant thought, "No wonder she's looking for a ramrod." He was riding away when Petty said:

"Usher is usin' your place as a line camp now. Ed Peebles is there, and I hope you have to blast him out with a bullet." Ben took off his hat, revealing a bandage where the hair had been shaved from his scalp. "The drunken son got fresh with Rose Saturday night. When I took a poke at him he pistol-whipped me. That's why I'm learnin' how to shoot straight. I'm goin' to fight Peebles with his own tools one of these days."

"Maybe you won't have to," Tennant suggested. "Maybe I'll kick him off my place so hard there won't be anything left for you to shoot at."

II

WHEN Leona Bell crossed Commissary Creek and saw where fresh hoof prints entered the road from the west, she murmured thoughtfully:

"So Mr. Tall and Tough didn't come through Quadrille."

She was wondering about that, and about his "reasons a-plenty" when she

rode into Quadrille and put up her horse at McGonigle's Livery. There was, she decided, only one reason a trail tramp would detour around town—he didn't want to be seen. So thinking, she crossed Main Street and spoke to Sheriff Sam Lambert who sat in the stippled shade of a pepper tree on the jail side of the courthouse.

"I want to look at your Rogues' Gallery," she informed him, and went into the office.

Lambert rose from his chair with an old man's reluctance. "They ain't much to look at," he said, and propelled his saddle-warped boots to the doorway.

Leona peered at the half dozen fly-specked posters on the bulletin board, seeing at once that none of them closely resembled the man she had met at Commissary Creek. Then she glanced at Lambert's disordered desk.

"Any new circulars you haven't posted?" she asked.

"No," Sheriff Sam said, eyeing her in speculative fashion. "What you done—hired a drifter you think is on the dodge?"

"I tried to, but he wouldn't hire," Leona reported.

Lambert followed her outside.

"It's none of my business, Miss Leona," he said hesitantly, "but I don't like to see you start a ruckus with Tate Usher. The Bar Bell won't win nothin' in a fight against the TU. It'd be better to meet Tate halfway, and settle things peaceable."

"That's what my father did," Leona scoffed. "And so has everyone else. We've met Usher halfway so many times his TU steers are crowding us out of business."

"Every move Tate made was legal," Lambert argued. "You can't blame a man for wanting more grass and water. It's a real old-timey habit that nothin' ever changes."

"It's time someone tried changing it then," Leona declared. "I'm going to try, along with Ben Petty who has decided to join me. And there'll be others."

"Petty!" Lambert snorted. "Why, your own foreman claims Petty has been eatin' Bar Bell beef for years!"

Leona shrugged. "I'd welcome the devil if he knew how to shoot a gun," she said cynically.

She went on toward Morgan's Mercantile then.

"She's got a go-to-blazes streak in her, by grab," Sheriff Lambert muttered. "She has for a fact!"

Ten minutes later Clark Morgan expressed approximately the same opinion. He sat at his desk on the rear balcony of the Mercantile, a fashionably garbed, pursy-mouthed man who had built up a profitable banking and freighting business after inheriting this store from his father.

"You've got a rebel's temper," he said to Leona censuringly. "It may cost you Bar Bell one of these days."

Leona left her chair and moved around the desk, and when Morgan rose with habitual courtesy, she noticed how his narrow shoulders exaggerated a slightly bulging midriff. In a land of tanned, slim-hipped horsemen, he seemed pudgy and pale, yet—and she consciously tallied this in his favor—Clark Morgan could buy and sell most of the men in Bunchgrass Basin.

"So now I'm a rebel," she murmured with mock concern. She cuffed him lightly with her gloves. "That's for calling me names. Can't you see that I've no choice, Clark. There's upwards of three hundred TU steers on Tonto Flats right now, with more drifting through the Tailholts every day. I need that graze for winter feed. My mother stuff won't pull through without it, and if I lose them, where's my calf crop? I've got to have that graze, and there's only one way to save it."

"But you have neither the men nor the money for a fight against TU," Morgan objected.

Leona eyed him with frank speculation, remembering that this modest merchant had once asked her to marry him. It had been an almost formal proposal, without passion or eagerness. Yet he had seemed genuinely disappointed when she refused him.

"I can hire the men," she said, "if you'll lend me the money."

Morgan frowned. He asked: "Do you realize what you'd be up against, Lee? A range war is a messy business. You won't be dealing with Tate Usher when the shooting starts. You'll be bucking men like Idaho Cleek and Red Naviska and Dude Finn."

"With a good-sized loan I could hire men like them," Leona said stubbornly.

"It would be a foolish transaction for both of us," Morgan counseled, speaking with unemotional preciseness. "Bar Bell was in poor shape when your father died. It is no better off now. The thing for you to do is sit tight, and wait."

"Wait for what?" Leona demanded.

A SECRETIVE smile eased Morgan's lips.

"I happen to know that Usher strained his credit when he brought in that big bunch of Mexican-run steers," he said. "He gambled on a rise in beef prices which didn't materialize. Now he is borrowing money and dickering with the Indian Agency to make contract delivery of those steers the first of the year."

"By that time my winter graze would be gone," Leona said. "I've got to save it now, while there's something to save."

Morgan sighed. "I don't see how it can be accomplished, Lee. Honestly I don't."

"Then you won't lend me the money?"

Morgan shook his head. "Running a ranch is no job for a woman, much less running a range war. Why don't you sell out at a fair price and move into town?"

"Never!" Leona exclaimed.

She picked up her gloves and stood for a moment, angrily whipping them against the palm of her left hand.

"I'll never let Bar Bell go, no matter what happens!" Then she asked, "Would you also refuse to lend your wife money, if you had a wife?"

MORGAN reached out and patted her arm with a tallow-white hand.

"My wife would automatically own half of what I possess," he said. "She could spend it as she chose." His fingers tightened on her arm and a warmth came into his eyes. "But she would live with me, here in town," he said sternly.

"Why, Clark!" Leona said, and laughed at him.

She crossed the balcony, eyeing him over her shoulder and smiling back at him. Just before she started down the rear stairway she said:

"A wife usually lives with her husband, Clark."

She went downstairs and narrowly avoided collision with Tate Usher in the doorway. The big, bland-faced rancher stepped aside and bowed.

"Beg pardon," he said, and chuckled as if enjoying some secret joke. "How's your foreman, Miss Leona?" he asked. "Still bedfast?"

"Yes," she said curtly, "which is why your Mexican steers haven't been run off Tonto Flats."

"My, my," Usher said, the words merging into sly laughter.

Leona went on out to the street and presently, as she passed the courthouse on her way to Doc Medwick's home, she noticed that "Idaho" Cleek was sitting on the jail stoop conversing with Sheriff Lambert. The significance of that, added to Clark Morgan's refusal to make a loan, increased the sense of frustration which the stranger had spawned at Commissary Creek.

"The devil with them!" she whispered. "With them all!"

Tennant drew his gun and fired at the bright beacons of muzzle flare above him (Chap. XIII)

IT WAS coming sundown when Jeff Tennant rode into his unfenced yard. Everything looked about the same as when he had left it three years ago. The cabin's pinewood logs had weathered a trifle; the Roman Four brand on the door didn't show quite as plain, and the corral gate sagged badly.

"Hinges need resetting," Tennant thought, and saw a roan horse trot across the corral.

Peebles' double-rigged saddle hung on the kak pole, yet no smoke came from the cabin's stovepipe and Tennant wondered why the TU rider wasn't cooking supper. And why the door was closed.

When the roan nickered a greeting, Tennant kept a strict watch on the cabin's two front windows, his right hand close to holster. But there was no sign of life.

"Hello the house!" he called.

He waited, puzzled. Unless Peebles kept two horses and two saddles, he was here. A man wouldn't go far afoot. It occurred to Tennant that the TU puncher might be forted up in the cabin, waiting for a fight.

"Let him," Tennant muttered and, keeping a wary watch, rode to the cabin.

Still no sign nor sound of movement. Tennant peered at a cobwebbed window, but the glass was too dirty to see through.

"Anybody home?" he called, and waited another long moment before dismounting.

If trouble was coming it should come now. He nudged his gun so that it rested loose in the holster, stood at one side of the door and opened it.

Smoke billowed out with a wave of room-trapped odors the like of which Jeff Tennant had never smelled at one time—an acrid stench that was like a rubbish fire, a branding corral, and a Saturday night saloon combined. Presently, as the smoke thinned, he saw Ed Peebles sprawled on the smoldering tick of a brass bed.

THE fire, which hadn't touched Peebles' slack-jawed face, had burned the tick down to the bed's sagging slats all along the front edge. It smoldered beneath Peebles' fully clad body, and the cardboard tag of a Durham sack in his shirt pocket was burning now.

Tennant grabbed a bucket of water from the wash bench beside the door. He doused the tick and, hurriedly toting another bucketful from the windmill water trough, doused the tick again for good measure.

Then Tennant considered the smoke-fogged, disordered room. On a shelf above the bed was a dust-covered copy of "Blackstone's Commentary," symbol of an old Texan's desire that his son should be a lawyer, and two tally books, one of which contained layout plans for the house, blacksmith shop, sheds and corrals Tennant had dreamed of building here.

There was a quart whisky bottle, less than half full, on a chair near the bed and two empty bottles on a table which was littered with dirty dishes.

Tennant thought, "Ed staged a spree, went to bed with a lit cigarette, and when the tick caught fire, the smoke smothered him."

He felt no pity for the dead rider. But the smell in this smoke-fouled, filthy room sickened him. He went outside, watered his horse, filled his canteen and opened the corral gate so Peebles' bronc could shift for itself. Then he rode up the triple-toed slope south of his cabin and, making camp, had a frugal supper cooked at dusk.

* * * * *

Dr. John Medwick sat relaxed on the well-padded seat of his red-wheeled buggy and allowed his bay pacer to shuffle slowly up the road. This was five miles north of Commissary Creek, near the fork which led to the Bar Bell.

Doc lit up his second cigar since supper, feeling a trifle guilty and recalling an old scene out of the past—a time long ago when his wife had been alive and when a dollar had been hard to come by. He had been strictly rationed to one cigar a day, but occasionally, when a customer paid a bill or some other unexpected good fortune befell them, he had celebrated with a second cigar, whereupon six-year-old daughter Jane would exclaim censuringly, "Look, Mommy—two at a day!"

Doc chuckled, remembering all the fun they'd had in those days when Quadrille had been a hurly-burly mining camp and cowtown combined. He had brought his bride to the Senate Hotel, intending to lavish the luxury of hotel living on her indefinitely. But within one week's time she had prodded him into starting construction on a home of their own, choosing a site near the Big Arroyo bridge. "So I can hear you coming home when you've been to some ranch late at night," she had said.

A long time ago. Now Jane was as her mother had been. She looked the same and cooked the same, and was ready for marriage. But Jane was waiting for a man who might never return, and who might be unworthy of her if he came back. Doc was thinking about that when he heard horses behind him. Turning, he saw Tate Usher and Idaho Cleek come jogging along the road.

They drew abreast of the rig.

"Nice night for a drive, eh Doc?" Usher said good-naturedly.

"Fine evening," Medwick agreed, and glanced at Cleek.

The hatchet-faced foreman barely nodded. He had a secretive, sardonic way which was in direct contrast to Usher's loud, loose-tongued talk.

"Going to the Bar Bell?" Usher inquired, keeping his horse alongside the rig.

Medwick nodded, whereupon Usher said amusedly:

"Better not cure Huffmeyer too soon, Doc. Leona says them broken ribs is the only thing that keeps Bar Bell from starting a ruckus with TU. And she told Sheriff Lambert she's fixing for a fight."

He laughed, adding slyly, "That would be odd—her fighting me."

They rode on ahead then and Doc muttered to himself: "Not half as odd as you fighting her."

Watching them fade into the dust-hazed twilight, Medwick noticed how ill-matched a pair they made, with Usher's flabby bulk accentuating the reed-thin shape of his foreman. They were as unalike as two men could be, yet they seemed to work in perfect harmony and were seldom separated.

When Medwick turned into the Bar Bell road he got to thinking about the night Leona's mother died. Tate Usher had come for him at suppertime, and on the way to TU had explained how Mrs. Bell had been thrown as she was mounting a spirited horse that was unaccustomed to side saddle and women's riding skirts.

Tate hadn't bothered to explain why Claude Bell's wife had been visiting at TU, which then had been a ramshackle, one-man outfit. But Doc had guessed the reason was partly due to the fact that Bell was twice the age of his pretty, vivacious wife, and partly due to Tate Usher's good looks. For Tate had been a handsome scamp with the women before prosperity and soft living had turned him flabby fat.

Medwick bit off the soggy end of his cigar and spat it out. But he couldn't banish the distasteful memory of Mrs. Bell and Usher. And now Leona Bell was threatening to fight Tate Usher, and Tate was saying how odd that would be. . . .

WHILE the ruddy embers of his fire turned to ash, Jeff Tennant reviewed the monstrous fraud which had

banished him from this country three years ago.

He had driven his little bunch of steers to town slowly, wanting to retain every pound of tallow, and so it had been almost dark when he choused them into a pen at the Quadrille stockyards. He had taken Jane Medwick to a dance that night, celebrating an occasion which had seemed vastly more important than the money involved simply because it had taken two years of tedious effort.

He had felt high as a three-story house that night. But next morning, with a cattle buyer tallying the twenty steers and Sheriff Lambert acting as brand inspector, all the fine glow had gone with Lambert's challenge of three animals whose TU brands had been worked over into Roman Fours.

"Crude," the old lawman had announced. "Tol'able crude."

And so they had been. Three botched brands contrived by lengthening the T's so they ran across the tops of the U's which were reburned to resemble V's; then another line burned across the bottom to form the base of a Roman Four.

Tennant had known he would have noticed them yesterday if the steers had been in the bunch he had driven to town, yet the altered brands had been old enough to be well scabbed. Almost at once he had guessed the answer—had known beyond shadow of doubt that Tate Usher had rigged this deal beforehand and framed him during the night. But there had been no telltale tracks to prove the TU steers had been substituted for three of his own. All he had found had been a couple of boot prints in the deep dust at one side of the pen gate, and they hadn't matched, one being a full inch shorter than the other.

Tennant remembered that Sheriff Lambert had seemed sorry to arrest him, that old Doc Medwick had offered to import a lawyer from Tucson, and that Jane had brought a chocolate cake to the courthouse jail. But because they had all believed him guilty he had told them all to go to thunder.

The hoof pound of a running horse interrupted Tennant's sober reflections. Quickly stamping out the last remnants of his campfire he listened as a horse crossed the ridge, heading south. When the remote rumor of travel finally faded he thought:

"Someone heading for Ben's place," and wondered who would be visiting Petty at this time of night.

He was thinking about that when he pulled off his boots. It occurred to him that the rider might have stopped by the cabin, in which case he was probably taking word of Peebles' death to Ben, and to Sheriff Lambert.

"Ben can quit his target practise now," Tennant reflected, and presently went to sleep. . . .

Some time later he awoke to find himself sitting up, gun in hand. For a moment he didn't know what had aroused him and, mistaking moonrise for daybreak, thought he'd had his sleep out. Then a fast-traveling horse passed so close he heard its gusty, labored breathing. Tennant hurried around a windfall that barred his view. He saw a horse and rider go down the north slope, disappearing into the lower shadows where moonlight hadn't reached.

The hoofbeats died out and Tennant went back to his blanket, stepping now with barefooted caution.

"One rode south and another rode north and they were in an almighty hurry," he thought.

It occurred to him that both trips might have been made by the same rider. But why? Whether one man or two, why all this nighthawking?

Shrugging off the riddle of that, Tennant shaped up a cigarette and smoked it. This country was full of riddles, none of which greatly concerned him. Or so he thought.

His plans were simple, and complete. Tomorrow he would ride to Quadrille and wait for a chance to force Tate Usher into drawing a gun against him. It might take a little time, and a bit of maneuvering, for Usher was no bragging bully given to casual violence.

The showdown would have to occur in town, so there would be reliable witnesses. And it had to be at a time when Idaho Cleek wasn't beside his boss. For even though Tennant considered himself a better than average gunhand, he had no illusions about his skill as compared to Cleek's. The TU foreman was a wizard with a gun.

As if in echo of that thought, the sound of shooting drifted up to Tennant —two spaced shots that ran raggedly back through the hills. Tennant discarded his cigarette, taking care to toss it into the campfire's ashes. He put on his socks and boots, listening for further sound, but hearing none.

Presently, as he saddled his horse, the smell of wood smoke came faintly to him. When he rode out to the rim of the ridge he saw a flare of flames above his cabin. "The dirty sons!" he exclaimed. "The dirty, blasted sons!"

For a long moment Navis-ka stared at Tennant's leveled revolver. "How'd you get here?" he demanded

III

PETTY was pouring his breakfast coffee when Tennant rode into the Lazy P yard. Ben came to the door, shading his sleep-swollen eyes against morning's first sunlight.

"Come on in," he said glumly, and filled another cup.

Tennant seated himself at the table and blew steam from his coffee.

"You have a visitor last night?"

Petty shook his head.

"Well, somebody rode from my cabin to your corral, and back again," Tennant reported.

This news didn't interest Ben Petty at all. He went on with his eating for a full moment before he asked:

"What would anyone rim around here in the dark for?"

"That depends," Tennant said. He reached for a hot biscuit before asking: "Did you tell folks in town that you were gunning for Peebles?"

Petty nodded. "Told everybody within earshot, whilst Doc Medwick was bandaging my head."

"So that's it," Tennant mused.

"That's what?" Petty asked irritably.

"It explains the things I saw at first daylight this morning," Tennant said. "Except for me being camped on Trinity Ridge last night you'd be good as in Yuma Prison right now, Ben—or dangling from a scaffold."

Ben Petty gulped and put down his coffee cup. All the drowsiness went out of his eyes.

"What the devil you talkin' about?" he demanded.

Tennant told him of finding Peebles dead, of seeing a rider cross the ridge, and hearing shots.

"I couldn't figure it out until I saw my cabin on fire. Then I guessed it had something to do with you. At daylight I took a close look at what was left of Ed Peebles. Somebody put a slug through his head, and probably another through his back. Then they doused the shack with coal oil and set fire to it, figuring a coroner would discover where bullets had busted through bone, and that Ed's body would be too badly burned to show that he'd been dead before the shots were fired."

For a long moment Ben Petty sat in shocked silence. Finally he said, "And those tracks from your cabin to here would make it look like I done it."

Tennant nodded. "It's my guess that Tate Usher and Idaho Cleek must've stopped by to see Ed on their way home from town. When they found him dead of suffocation they saw a good chance of framing you off your place—like they framed me off mine." He added, "I saw something else at Roman Four. Something that might prove Usher was present at that other frameup three years ago."

Ben Petty poured himself another cup of coffee.

"I guess a jury would of convicted me on circumstantial evidence," he said. "I'd be a gone goose sure enough, except for you."

"It makes an airtight case," Tennant agreed. "You publicly threatened to kill Peebles. He's found dead, and there's a set of tracks running from your place to Roman Four, and back again." He added slowly, "I'm an ex-convict, Ben. A jury might not accept my testimony about finding Peebles dead from suffocation."

The impact of that showed in Petty's eyes. And in his voice.

"But it's the truth!" he exclaimed. "They got to believe the truth, no matter who tells it!"

A cynical smile touched Tennant's lips. He regarded Ben scornfully.

"Did they believe me three years ago?" he asked. "Did you?"

Ben slowly shook his head.

"The truth is too blame simple," Tennant scoffed. "Folks want something fancy and complicated, something a smart lawyer can build up with words, like a painted picture."

"You studied to be a lawyer for a spell, didn't you?" Ben asked.

"Less than a year," Tennant said. "Then I decided I'd rather associate with horses."

"You figger I'd have a chance in court, if they didn't believe your story?"

Tennant shook his head.

"It'd be killin'," Petty muttered. "The charge would be cold-blooded killin'."

He got up, walked across the room, and took his gun gear from a peg beside the door.

"They ain't goin' to railroad me like they did you," he said nervously. "I'll

leave the country first."

"Which is exactly what Usher wants you to do," Tennant reminded him. "Tate Usher don't give a hang where you go, just so you leave. He wants this range, Ben—all of it."

PETTY strapped on his gun-belt, his fingers fumbling the buckle. It wasn't overly warm in the shack but perspiration greased his frowning face, and he kept glancing furtively at the front window, kept canting his head to listen.

"I'm goin' to hide out in the hills for a spell," he muttered. "I'm goin' to wait and see if Sheriff Sam believes your story. You reckon he will?"

"No telling about that," Tennant said. "But there's one way we might make it stand up in court. If we could get Doc Medwick to the Roman Four ahead of anyone else there might be a good chance to prove what really happened."

"Then what in tarnation you waitin' on?" Petty demanded. "Why ain't you hightailin' for town to get Doc?"

"Because I don't believe he's home," Tennant said, smiling a little at the swift change in Petty. A few minutes ago Ben had been sleepy and dull-eyed, interested only in eating breakfast. Now he was eager and impatient, like a tight strung wire, twanging at the slightest contact. "You said Leona went to get Doc yesterday. Well, I started for town this morning and saw one set of wheel tracks in the road. Medwick must've driven to the Bar Bell last night and stayed over."

"Then I'll go fetch him right now!" Ben declared. "I'll tell him the whole story, just like you told me."

"No," Tennant objected. "Not the whole story. Just tell Doc the part about me finding Peebles smothered. Also one thing more, Ben, and this is important. There's a set of boot prints in the mud near the watering trough. Tell Doc I want him to measure them exactly, and write the figures down. Tell him to be sure he gets those measurements correct to the fraction of an inch."

"Won't you be at the Roman Four when Doc gets there?"

Tennant shook his head. "I'm going to Quadrille and make my report to Lambert. I'll tell him I found Peebles smothered, and save the rest of my story until it's needed."

Petty looked worried again. "How about them boot prints?" he asked. "Supposin' they was made by the same size boots I wear?"

"What size you wear?" Tennant asked casually.

"Eight and a half?"

"On both feet?"

"Of course," Petty said.

"Then both those prints won't be the same as yours," Tennant told him.

"But who ever saw a man wear different size boots?" Petty demanded.

"I have," Tennant said, "and I'll be seeing him again, real soon, I hope."

"What's his name?"

"That," Tennant admitted, "is what I've got to find out."

Petty eyed him wonderingly. "It sounds as loco as a drunkard's dream," he complained. "But mebbe you know what you're doin'."

Then he hurried out to the horse corral. . . .

At about this same time, Idaho Cleek stook in the office doorway at the TU's headquarters on the Rio Pago, giving out the day's riding instructions to five men assembled before him. His three gold teeth glinted in the early sunlight, bright mementos of a fist fight ten years ago. He had lost three front teeth in that fight and had never lifted a hand against a man since, unless that hand held a gun.

"You," Cleek said, indicating young Johnny Peebles, "ride up and help your brother push the rest of them Sonora steers down to Tonto Flats. There's upwards of two hundred head between

Menafee Camp and the Bar Bell road."

Johnny, whose cheeks still bore a boyish fuzz in lieu of beard, asked hopefully:

"You want I should stay with Ed until the job is done?"

"Yes," Cleek said. A thoughtful squint came to his milky blue eyes and he added, "Stay away from Ben Petty's place. That maverick hates Ed's insides."

Lee Pardee chuckled. "Rose Barlow sure struck Ed's fancy," he said reflectively with a sly wink.

"She's liable to make a Gentle Annie out of Ed—a regular Romeo," "Red" Naviska said.

"Romeo, your grandmother!" Johnny blurted, bristling like a ruffled pup. "Ed ain't—"

"Go on, go on," Cleek ordered gruffly. "This ain't no time for funnin'. There's work to do."

JOHNNY went over to the corral and stepped to saddle, his narrow, buck-toothed face showing the other members of the crew a scowl as he rode past them.

"Ed ain't no calico chaser and he never was," Johnny insisted, and tried to shut his ears to their laughter.

Riding easy and enjoying the sun's increasing warmth on his shoulders, Johnny Peebles reached Menafee Camp around nine o'clock. "Dude" Finn was in the corral doctoring a gored bronc.

"Howdy, Kid," Dude called. "You come to take my place a spell?"

"No," Johnny said, not liking to be called "Kid" and showing his resentment by riding on.

"What's your rush?" Finn demanded. "A feller don't git to see nobody on these one-man jobs. Worse'n bein' a sheepherder."

"I got work to do," Johnny said, without looking back.

He had never cottoned to Finn anyway. Dude was always running off at the mouth about girls. According to his say, Dude had honey-fussed with every good looking girl in Bunchgrass Basin at one time or another.

"They all like their sweetenin'," Dude had told Johnny. "It's just a question of how you go about it. Some likes to be teased and some likes to be toughed. But they'll come to a man if he handles 'em right."

Ed wasn't like Dude at all—scarcely ever looked at a girl, unless he was drinking. And he hadn't boozed much until he took over the Roman Four job. It wasn't seemly to stick a man in a line camp by himself, but Idaho Cleek claimed Usher couldn't afford two-man camps on account of paying the same as fighting wages the year around.

TU paid good wages, all right, but being by himself so much had made a lone drinker out of Ed. That was why he had acted so sweet on Rose Barlow. Ed didn't give a hoot for her, nor any other female.

Johnny grinned, recalling the fine plans he and Ed had for the future; how they were saving up a stake to buy a ranch of their own in Texas. Just thinking about it made Johnny feel good.

"We'll have our own brand, the EJ Connected," he mused. "Which is more'n Pardee or Naviska'll ever have."

There'd be no more bunkhouse jokes about honey-fussin' females then, or being called "Kid" all the time. No more lonely line camp jobs for Ed. They would live in their own house and brand their own cattle and maybe have the fastest quarter-horses in seven counties.

Johnny saw a dozen head of TU steers in the timber beyond Menafee Camp, but he didn't bother to chouse them out. Time enough for that after he hooked up with Ed. A feller got lonesome for his kinfolks when he didn't see them for a longish spell.

Johnny put his horse to a lope and, leaving the trail, took a shortcut through the roughs southwest of the

Pot Holes. This, he thought, was devilish country to work cattle in—all up and down and yonderly. Texas was the place. A man could ride all day on the plains and never see a hill. These Arizona cowpokes could have this forsaken country and welcome to it.

When he crossed the last ridge above Roman Four Johnny glimpsed the burned cabin, and smelled it.

"What the devil!" he blurted.

Johnny rushed his bronc down the ridge, remembering what Cleek had said about Ben Petty hating Ed. If that blasted homesteader had hurt Ed, or run him off—

He was thinking about that, and half afraid he might find Ed wounded or something, when he galloped up to the great gray mound of ashes and saw what remained of his brother, sprawled between the charred uprights of the doorway.

The words Johnny whispered were not blasphemy—but a prayer. . . .

Jeff Tennant reached Quadrille shortly before noon, the tramp of his horse setting up a measured beat of bonging sound as he trotted across the plank bridge at the west end of town.

Remembering how difficult a time he'd had chousing his twenty steers across here three years ago, Tennant grinned. He had cussed them in the dust-hazed twilight, never guessing that he had an audience. He had called their heifer mothers and their sires whiteface hellions of uncertain ancestry.

When he finally had them all across the bridge, there had been Jane Medwick standing at her front gate, inviting him to supper.

And now, as Tennant glanced at Doc Medwick's little white house, he loosed a gusty grunt of pleasure. For Jane was coming down the veranda steps. She came toward him, holding out her hand as she came up to him.

"Jeff!" she exclaimed. "Jeff Tennant!"

THE thought came to him that this was exactly as he had pictured it—Jane running to meet him with a glow in her eyes and a smile making twin dimples in her cheeks. He dismounted and took her hand and there was a moment when the impulse to take her in his arms was like the tantalizing itch of a half-healed wound. But he resisted the impulse. He rocked back on his heels, regarding her soberly.

"The man hadn't seen the girl for a long time," he said, "so he looked at her real close, not meaning any harm."

This was an old game they had played the first time he had taken her to a dance, using it as a mutual bridge between strangers.

So now she asked with mock concern:

"What did the man think of the girl?"

"Well," Tennant said, eyeing her critically from face to feet and back again, "he saw mighty little change. Hair still the same off-shade sorrel, eyes the color of wood smoke on a windless morning, face a bit on the thin side, except when she smiles—to show off her dimples." Then he grinned and announced heartily, "No improvement at all. Just the prettiest girl east or west of the Pecos!"

"The man still has his blarney ways with women," Jane said, frankly pleased. "He knows how to get himself invited to supper." She retrieved her hand, eyed the slim fingers he had squeezed, and said, "If they aren't broken I'll bake you a chocolate cake."

"Chocolate cake!" Tennant exclaimed, and smacked his lips. "I knew there was some reason I'd ought to pay you a visit, but I'd forgotten there was such a thing as chocolate cake."

"That's one thing you and Dad agree on," Jane said smilingly. She glanced down the road. "Dad went to the Bar Bell last night and should be home any time. I've been watching for him."

"He'll be a little late," Tennant reported. "Ed Peebles went on a one-man

spree, set fire to my shack and smothered to death. I sent word to Doc."

"How horrible!" Jane exclaimed.

"I don't care about his dying," Tennant, "but I wish he'd picked some other place to do it in."

"The Shack of Dreams," Jane murmured. She plucked at his sleeve and said softly, "You can make all those fine dreams come true, Jeff."

"Still got faith in your favorite brand blotter?" Tennant asked self-mockingly.

Jane's smile faded, taking the dimples with it. "I never believed that," she said. "You took it for granted." She met his gaze fully, as if willing to have him see all there was to see, and to know how it was with her. "Didn't you get my letter?" she asked finally.

Tennant nodded. "Never was much good at writing letters in jail," he explained.

"It must've been awful," Jane said, and studied his face as if reckoning what damage the prison years had done. "Dad tried to get you pardoned, Jeff. But nothing ever came of it."

For a long moment they stood in silence, having no easy way of saying the words that needed to be said.

"I was a fool to ignore her letter," Tennant thought. But he couldn't quite say it, nor explain what the jury's verdict had done to his pride.

"I'm going to notify Lambert about Peebles," he said. "Then I'll get a shearing at Biddle's barber shop and be back in time for supper."

He stepped into saddle.

"Don't do anything foolish, Jeff," Jane said, almost pleadingly.

It was, he supposed, her way of asking him to forget the past, to forget what Sheriff Lambert and those other fools had done to him. He smiled down at her, not knowing the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Nothing foolish," he said.

Then he gave her a comradely salute and rode on along Main Street. Jane, he guessed, was wondering what he intended to do about Tate Usher. And everyone else in this town would be wondering the same thing. Especially Sheriff Lambert. The mealy-mouthed old lawdog would probably try to talk him out of doing anything, which was a specialty with Lambert. He had made a career of doing nothing. In a country gripped by one man's greed, Sheriff Lambert preached a policy of peace at any price.

Tennant passed Swanson's Feed Store and turned in at McGonigle's Livery, peering down at the ape-featured man in the doorway.

"A mean-looking Irishman if ever I saw one," he proclaimed solemnly.

"Jeff—ye spalpeen!" Tay McGonigle shouted. "'Tis glad I am to see ye back!"

AS McGONIGLE led his horse down the long runway to a rear stall, Tennant gave Main Street a leisurely appraisal. Quadrille, he reflected, hadn't changed at all. The same old adobe and false-fronted frame buildings lined both sides of this street, and half of them were vacant—disintegrating reminders of a long gone era when Quadrille had been the toughest town between Lordsburg and Tucson.

There was the old Bonanza Bazaar where Lily Langtry's voice had roused rafter-shaking applause; the Gilded Cage Dancehall with its cobwebbed windows and sagging gallery; the Silver Stud Saloon, the Belladonna, the Rosebud and Ace High—roofless, weather-warped monuments to free-spending miners who once had swarmed the Calico Queen diggings five miles east of Quadrille.

North of Main Street and running parallel with it, was Fremont Street where the merchants of this town had their comfortable homes. One short block south of Main, perched along the bank of Big Arroyo, was Sashay Alley

which ran crookedly east to the stockyards.

Here were the crumbling, blanket-windowed huts, the countless barking dogs and the lively, pungent odors of Old Mexico.

Here also was the parlor house of Mayme Shay, handy by the stockyards where trail crews camped.

Tennant sauntered along the plank walk and thought, "It even smells the same." There was the horsy reek of McGonigle's stable, the acrid taint of Phil Burleson's blacksmith forge, and presently, as he passed Morgan's Mercantile, the tangy, aromatic mixture of fresh-ground coffee and vinegar and coal oil.

But because three years in Yuma Prison had changed him, the town didn't feel the same.

Clark Morgan stepped from the post office doorway and peered at Tennant. "Hello," he said civilly. "Going back to your homestead, I presume."

Tennant nodded, seeing no change in Morgan. The merchant-banker, he guessed, wasn't more than thirty-five years old, yet he had the precise and dignified ways of an old man.

"I might be in to see you about a loan, later on," Tennant said. "Reckon you can spare a couple hundred dollars in cash?"

"No," Morgan said promptly.

Tennant waited for an explanation, and when none was offered by the banker, he said:

"I've been told your father made a fortune by using that word at the right time."

If Morgan resented this sarcasm he showed no sign of it.

"Refusing to make loans is a banker's privilege," he said and walked away.

Tennant shrugged. "No credit for ex-convicts," he muttered.

That meant he would have to take time to gather a little jag of steers and sell them, before he could build a cabin.

Tennant wasn't surprised when he came upon the abandoned chuckwagon (Chap. XIII)

IV

MAYME SHAY came out of the Bon Ton Millinery, a tall, buxom women whose fashionable clothes and breezy good humor had become a Quadrille tradition, along with her parlor house. She smiled at Tennant and when he tipped his hat she stopped beside him.

"I saw Clark Morgan walk off like he was afraid you'd pick his pockets," she said. "You need a grubstake, Jeff?"

Tennant shook his head. "Thanks just the same. Did Hobo Bill Wimple locate that Spanish treasure chest while I've been gone?"

"Not unless he's keeping it a secret," Mayme said, and her lusty laughter was good to hear. "Sometimes I think Bill doesn't care whether he finds the gold or not. It's the looking that he likes. Gives him something to dream about."

Tennant was considering that as he walked toward the courthouse. "Something to dream about." He'd had dreams a-plenty before he went to Yuma. Big dreams.

He entered Lambert's office and found it deserted, whereupon he quartered across Main Street to the Palace Saloon.

"Big Sid" Stromberg stood behind the bar, absently polishing its rosewood surface, while Joe Barlow downed his first drink of the day. Stromberg nodded a wordless greeting, his chalky face showing neither surprise nor pleasure. His down-swirling black mustache seemed thicker and fuller than it had been three years ago, but the sparse hair draped sideways across his big head was thinner, showing more scalp.

Joe Barlow swung around at once.

"They said you'd never come back, Jeff," he exclaimed, "but I knowed blamed well you would!"

He came to meet Tennant, walking in the strict fashion of a man seldom sober. He shook hands limply and eyed Tennant's face as if seeking some important sign.

"You've come to stay, ain't you, Jeff?" he asked. "You ain't just ridin' through?"

Tennant grinned. "I'm staying," he said.

Looking into Barlow's watery, wavering eyes, he felt a quick sense of pity for this wilted old cowman. Joe had never been a big man, nor a bold one, but he'd had his pride and his plans for the future. Now he had neither.

"Have a drink," Tennant invited.

"Don't mind if I do," Barlow said in a casual, disinterested way. But Tennant noticed that Joe licked his lips like a man burning with fever.

Sid Stromberg dropped Tennant's silver dollar into the till and placed change on the bar. He glanced at the doorway as if expecting visitors.

"I get considerable trade from the TU crew," he said flatly, "and I don't like trouble in my place."

"So?" Tennant said, remembering that Big Sid had served on the jury which had convicted him. "That wouldn't be a left-handed way of saying I'm not welcome at your bar, would it, Sid?"

Stromberg took a cigar from his vest pocket. He bit off its end, then changed his mind and put the cigar back in the same pocket.

"You heard what I said," he muttered crankily.

He walked down to the end of the bar and picked up a copy of the Tombstone *Epitaph*.

"Don't mind Sid," Joe Barlow urged. "He ain't got no sense of humor."

"Maybe he needs a drink," Tennant reflected, a tough grin slanting his cheeks. "Or maybe he needs a punch on the nose."

That suggestion seemed to startle Joe Barlow. But it had no visible effect on Stromberg. The big saloonman continued his reading for a full moment before he said:

"Any time you think you're man

enough, just step up and say so."

This, Tennant realized, was a foolish thing to do. Sid Stromberg outweighed him by thirty pounds or more and had a reputation for rough-and-tumble fighting. It was the sort of thing Jane had asked him not to do. But Tennant's rebellious streak had always been stronger than his caution, and it was now. He unbuckled his gun-belt, handed the gear to Barlow.

"I'm man enough, Stromberg," he announced.

Big Sid put down the paper. He took three cigars from his vest pocket and laid them on the bar. Then he sauntered out into the room, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand with his left palm and smiling in a thoroughly satisfied way.

"Let's see if your fighting is any better than your brand blotting," he suggested.

He was still smiling when Tennant pitched forward and hit him in the face.

The impact of knuckles against Stromberg's nose made a meaty sound above the scuffing of Tennant's boots and it was echoed by a snarled curse as Big Sid dodged sideward, narrowly evading Tennant's second swing. Stromberg wheeled around. He shook his head, and blood's redness appeared below his flattened nostrils.

BUT Tennant thought instantly, "He's not really hurt," and knew how poor his chances were now. He had gambled on gaining a quick advantage by hitting Stromberg hard enough to put him on the defensive. Instead he had merely stung the saloonman into swift and savage action.

"I'll stomp your insides into the floor!" Big Sid bellowed, and came at Tennant in the fist-cocked fashion of an accomplished slugger.

Tennant stood toe to toe with him, throwing punches and taking them against his guarding arms, until Stromberg broke this up with a sudden shift that appeared to be retreat. Tennant charged forward. He took a glancing blow that scraped a raw track high on his left cheek. He hit Stromberg in the paunch with an up-cutting right that made the big man squall a curse.

Tennant grinned, and tried to target Sid's rage-rutted face. But Stromberg blocked the blow. He caught Tennant a trifle off balance and battered him with both fists. Tennant tripped over a chair, fell to his hands and knees.

Stromberg leaned forward and aimed a long-looping right to Tennant's head. Tennant ducked, and was on his way up when Stromberg kicked him, the boot striking Tennant's s h o u l d e r hard enough to turn him completely around. Stromberg laughed, tried another kick, and missed as Tennant jumped clear.

"Stand still and fight," Big Sid growled.

He lunged into a slugging attack that forced Tennant steadily back.

The upper muscles of Tennant's right arm were completely numb now. He tried to circle, wanting time for the shock to wear off, but Stromberg kept boring in, kept forcing Tennant back until he was trapped between the bar's elbow and a front window, with the wall behind him.

Tennant slashed with his left, and hit Stromberg's nose again. He heard Sid snarl a curse, and saw the red smear his knuckles made as they glanced along Stromberg's cheek. He swung, and missed, and took a blow in the chest that staggered him.

He was remotely aware of people at the window—glimpsed young Billy Barlow's tense, wide-eyed face pressed against the glass. He dodged a looping left and saw Sid's fist smash into the wall and heard the sharp crack of a bone breaking.

When Big Sid yelped and shook his bloody knuckles, Tennant thought, "Now we're both single-fisted!" He

endeavored to slip past Stromberg, wanting room enough for the fast footwork which would neutralize Big Sid's longer reach and heavier weight. But Stromberg clubbed him back with his right fist.

Tennant fell against the bar, used it to propel himself forward into a clinch. He tied up Stromberg's good arm with his own good arm and tried for a body blow with his right, but there was no strength in it and the punch was useless.

Stromberg stamped on Tennant's instep. When the pain of that punishment failed to loosen Tennant's grip, Big Sid tried a vicious trick with his knee. But Tennant squirmed sideward, taking the smash on his hip. Then Stromberg put all his weight on Tennant and barged ahead, carrying Tennant along and ramming him hard against the wall.

There was a moment then, while Tennant gasped for air and Big Sid tore loose, that the fight seemed finished. Tennant's part of it, at least. Stromberg used his left elbow to pin Tennant against the wall.

"Now you get your needings," he bragged pantingly, and was pounding him unmercifully when Tennant drove a knee into Stromberg's midriff.

Big Sid groaned. He bent over, grabbing himself, and he was like that when Tennant hit him hard just below the right ear.

Stromberg tipped over with a whooshing sigh.

"You whupped him, by godfreys!" Joe Barlow exclaimed in an unbelieving voice. "You whupped him cold. . . ."

WINDY BIDDLE was gingerly shaving Tennant's scarred face and expressing his enthusiastic opinion of the fist fight so recently ended, when Sheriff Sam Lambert strode into the barbershop. The old lawman came over to the chair, peered at Tennant's lathered face.

"So you're back," he said.

Tennant waited until Biddle lifted the razor, then he said:

"Yeah."

Lambert squirted tobacco juice into a cuspidor, and wiped his drooping mustache on the back of an age-mottled hand.

"Word reached me at the cattle pens that a fight was goin' on," he reported.

Tennant looked up at Biddle who stood over him with razor poised.

"You hear anything about a fight?" he asked.

The bald-headed barber blinked. He swallowed, shook his head, and said nothing, which was a miracle of restraint, considering Windy's reputation for free and fancy talking.

"Must've been a false rumor," Tennant suggested soberly.

"Sid Stromberg don't look like he was hit by no false rumor," Lambert said in a mildly complaining voice. "He looks like he got tromped by a bronc."

That was enough for Windy Biddle.

"What a fight!" he exclaimed. "Blood all over the place—Sid pounding Jeff back and back, step by step, knocking him against the bar!"

Windy's eyes popped, seeing it all again. He waved his arms, narrowly missing the brim of Lambert's hat with the razor.

"It seemed as if Jeff was licked, as if he didn't have a prayer! But you should of saw the way he finished Sid off—with one terrific blow that flattened Big Sid like a busted bag!"

Lambert had stepped beyond range of the waving razor. "That's a poor way to make a fresh start, son," he said to Tennant. "A tol'able poor way."

"Fresh start your grandma!" Tennant scoffed. Then he said, "It might interest you to know I found Ed Peebles smothered to death in my cabin about sundown yesterday."

"Good glory!" Windy Biddle exclaimed.

"Smothered!" Lambert said, and re-

peated it, as if the word was strange to him. "Smothered?"

Tennant nodded. "By all the signs Ed went to bed drunk with a lit cigarette."

Lambert shifted his tobacco cud from one jaw to the other.

"You sure he smothered? You sure about that?"

"Yes," Tennant said, guessing what was in Lambert's mind. "I'm positive."

Johnny Peebles came into the barber shop. His face was pale and there was a sick look in his eyes.

"Ben Petty murdered my brother!" he announced.

Sheriff Lambert's glance shifted from Peebles to Tennant and back again.

"What makes you so sure Ed was murdered?" he demanded.

"I got eyes," Johnny said. "I ain't blind." He hitched up his belt and looked at his boots. "There's a bullet-hole in the back of Ed's head. I found horse tracks leading from Petty's corral to the burned cabin and back again. Everybody knows Petty was gunnin' for Ed."

Lambert looked at Tennant. "I thought you said—"

But Tennant broke in, asking Johnny, "How come you rode to Roman Four this morning?"

"Cleek sent me up there to help Ed," Johnny said.

Tennant thought: "The dirty dog, sending a kid to see a thing like that!"

"Petty is hidin' out in the hills," Johnny said to Lambert. "It'll take a posse to corral him."

Lambert nodded, and Windy Biddle exclaimed:

"I'll get a horse from the livery and go with you!"

"Not until you finish shaving me, you won't," Tennant told him. "This is one time you're going to take care of business before pleasure."

"Time's a-wastin'," Johnny complained impatiently. "We'd best be ridin', Sheriff."

Lambert went to the doorway, stopping there in the hesitant fashion of a man not sure of himself. There was a harassed expression in his eyes; indecision plainly nagged him. Lambert, Tennant thought, had made many mistakes and learned little from them. Some of those mistakes had turned him timid in the face of trouble, so that now he was like an old team horse a-straddle of a trace chain and not knowing which way to jump.

"You stay in town till I git back, Tennant," Lambert said. "I'll want some more talk from you."

"Sure," Tennant agreed. "All the talk you want." And as Lambert departed with Johnny Peebles, Tennant added, "Maybe more talk than you'll want to hear."

"What you mean by that?" Biddle asked inquisitively.

Tennant ignored the question. He

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

glanced through the side window at the clock atop the courthouse belfry, noting the time.

"I don't like to hurry a man," he said solemnly, and drew his gun. "But if I'm not shut of these whiskers in ten minutes I'm going to make a target of every mirror, shaving mug and tonic bottle in this place."

Windy muttered something, and plied his razor with such diligence that Tennant was crossing the Senate Hotel veranda eight minutes later.

BILLY BARLOW, who was fourteen years old and tall for his age, greeted Tennant with a grin.

"That was a dandy fight you won," he declared.

Tennant eyed him appraisingly. "You sure put on some height since I saw you," he said. "Reckon you must be around sixteen or seventeen by now."

Billy blushed with pleasure, not correcting that estimate.

"You goin' to need any help out to your place, Jeff?" he asked. And while Tennant considered that question, Billy added, "I still got my saddle and rope, and I can ride better'n the last time you seen me work cattle."

"How about your job here at the hotel?" Tennant inquired.

Billy puckered his lips and spat over the veranda railing.

"This piddlin' outfit ain't no fit place for a ranch-raised feller," he announced disgustedly. "Town life is a sorry way to live, Jeff."

"Shouldn't wonder," Tennant agreed, remembering how he had rebelled at spending his life in a law office for similar reasons.

He had tried to make his father understand those reasons, telling him about the hungers no amount of food could dispel, the nostalgia that nagged a rangebred man every time he passed a saddle shop, or saw a cowboy tote his warbag into a hotel, or heard steers bawling in a stockyard pen. He had told about the remembered feel of a good horse bracing against the rope jolt of a caught cow—all the sights and sounds and smells a man experienced working cattle, and in no other way.

But his father, who had spent forty years a-saddle and envied any man who earned his living on foot, had glumly predicted:

"You'll be just another fiddle-footed fool makin' horse tracks in the dust."

"Reckon you could use a hand?" Billy asked hopefully.

"I might, later on," Tennant admitted, "when things get straightened out a trifle."

Billy smiled knowingly. "Guess I know what you got in mind," he said, eyeing Tennant's gun. "Ma spooked Dad into quittin' the cow business, but there ain't nobody goin' to spook you off'n your ranch, are they, Jeff?"

Tennant shook his head. "You reckon it's too late for me to get some dinner?" he asked.

"Just pick yourself a table," Billy said and started for the kitchen. "I'll send Rose right in to take your order."

Tennant went into the dining room and sat down. Doc Medwick, he guessed, had left Roman Four by now. The old medico might meet Lambert and Johnny Peebles on his way home, but he might not, depending on the time element. The sheriff and Johnny Peebles would cut cross-country once they got into the Tailholts, and so might miss Medwick. Which would simplify things all around.

Rose Barlow came into the dining room and looked at Tennant with a frank, almost brazen, interest. Her black hair, fashioned high on her head, made her look taller than she was. Her red checked gingham dress fitted snugly at the waist, accentuating her curves. She had pouty lips—kissing lips—Tennant reflected—and dark eyes that invited a man's attention.

"I'm awfuly glad you're back, Jeff,"

she said in a thoroughly pleased voice.

Tennant thought, "Showing me she's a town girl now," and understood why Ed Peebles had got fresh with her. And why Ben Petty had taken up target practise. A girl like Rose would keep a man busy defending her honor.

"Three years prettier than the last time I saw you," Tennant said.

He had remained seated, but as Mrs. Barlow came in wiping flour-dusted hands on her apron, Tennant stood up and bowed in gallant fashion.

"Do you still bake the best corn bread in Arizona Territory, ma'am?" he asked.

"I see you haven't lost your glib tongue for the girls, young or old," Effie Barlow said disdainfully. But she couldn't quite hide her appreciation, revealing it in the way she compressed her lips against smiling. She glanced critically at Rose and asked: "Why in heaven's name don't you bring the man some food instead of standing there gawking at him? He looks like he'd been drug through a knot hole."

The thought came to Tennant that there was scarcely any resemblance between this faded woman and her sultry-eyed daughter. It seemed downright odd that such a careworn woman should have mothered a girl like Rose, or that so wilted a man as Joe Barlow should have been her father.

"I'm no mind reader, Mother," Rose said with a sullen pout. "Jeff hasn't ordered yet."

"Good gracious, girl, bring the man what we've got—beef and potatoes and a cup of coffee."

ROSE took time to primp a curl into place behind an ear. Then she asked: "Is that what you'd like, Jeff?"

"Suits me fine," Tennant said and sat down, expecting that Mrs. Barlow would follow Rose to the kitchen. But instead she took a chair at the table, and when young Billy came into the room, she said sharply, "You go on about your business, son."

"But I got some things to talk over with Jeff," Billy protested.

"So have I," Effie Barlow announced. "Now go along with you."

Billy sulked like a balky horse, departing with deliberate slowness, and Tennant thought, "That kid will run off one of these days to see what's over the hill."

"My Joe is talking big about helping you drive the TU out of the Tailholt Hills," Mrs. Barlow said.

Tennant showed his surprise. "What would give Joe an idea like that?" he demanded.

She shrugged. "I don't know what your plans are, and I don't care—just so Joe don't get mixed up in them. He's too old a man to sashay around with a hot-blooded young hellion like you."

"An ex-convict to boot," Tennant suggested.

"I don't care about that, one way or the other," Mrs. Barlow said. "Some folks say you was guilty, and some say you was framed. I don't know. And I guess the jury wouldn't of been so sure if it hadn't been TU brands that was altered. But I know that Joe has a wild streak in him. He killed a man in Texas once, before he was married. It might of meant jail for him, except that my old pappy was sheriff."

Rose came in carrying a tray.

"Would you do me a favor, Jeff—a big favor?" Mrs. Barlow asked, twisting her hands nervously.

"Sure," Tennant agreed.

"Promise you won't let Joe side you, no matter what happens."

Tennant smiled, amused at the thought of her booze-fogged husband helping anyone in a tight.

"It's a promise," he said.

"Thank you!" Effie Barlow exclaimed, and when she reached the kitchen door she called back, "There'll be hot apple pie by the time you're ready for it."

V

DOCTOR Medwick drove up in front of the Senate Hotel and motioned to Billy Barlow who sat on the veranda steps. The boy came over to Doc's buggy.

"Want to earn two bits, son?"

Billy considered this for a moment, not wanting to appear eager. Tay McGonigle, he had observed, never accepted an offer in a hurry when he was making a horse trade, no matter how good the bargain.

"Well," Doc asked impatiently, "do you, or don't you?"

"Sure," Billy said.

Medwick got down and handed Billy a quarter.

"Tay is on his way to the Tailholts with a wagon, and I haven't got time to stable Prince. Give him a fork of hay, but don't let him have any water. He's a trifle hot." Then he asked, "Is Jeff Tennant inside?"

"Eatin'," Billy reported. He had a boy's profound faith in Doc's opinions, so he asked, "You reckon Jeff could outshoot Idaho Cleek?"

Medwick took off his glasses and blew dust from the lenses. Ben Petty had asked the same question at the Bar Bell this morning. Ben had seemed sure Tennant would try to kill Tate Usher, and that he would have to fight Cleek first.

"They say no one can beat Cleek," Doc said, and went up the veranda steps.

"I bet Jeff can," Billy declared. "I bet he can do anything he puts his mind to."

Which was a reasonable supposition, Doc reflected, considering Jeff Tennant's past performances in a variety of endeavors. The tall Texan had a habit of getting things done.

Recalling how easily and quickly Tennant had displaced Clark Morgan as Jane's suitor when he had first come to Quadrille, Doc felt an urgent regret. Clark had a dependable, steady-going way. He would have made Jane a good husband.

The old medico sighed, went to the dining room doorway, and stood there for a moment, watching Rose Barlow serve Tennant his dessert. There was a coquettish smile on the girl's flushed face, and Doc noticed that she leaned close to Tennant when she placed his pie before him. Jeff, Doc reflected, seemed to attract women, all kinds of women.

Presently, as Medwick shook hands with Tennant, he understood what Jane had told him when he had stopped by the house on his way into town.

"Jeff looks just the same, except for his eyes," Jane had said. "They're hard as rock, even when he smiles." And so they were.

Rose went back to the kitchen and Doc asked quietly:

"What do you know about those bullet-holes in Ed Peebles' corpse?"

"I know Peebles smothered to death several hours before the shots were fired," Tennant said, and told Medwick the whole story. Then he asked, "Did you get the measurements of those two boot prints near the watering trough?"

Medwick nodded. "But they don't match, Jeff. What good are they?"

"That's what I thought, three years ago," Tennant muttered. "I saw the same off-sized prints at the stockyard gate where a brand blotting deal was framed on me. And they were fresh made. But I thought they were the tracks of different men. Now I know they belonged to one man."

"Who?"

Tennant shrugged. "They might belong to most anybody," he said, "but you can mighty soon find out."

"How?" Medwick demanded.

Tennant finished off the generous wedge of apple pie, and presently Doc asked:

"You aren't planning to kill Tate Usher, are you?"

"Yes," Tennant said in the most matter-of-fact voice a man could use. "I intended to do it the first time I came to town, but now I'll have to wait until we clear Ben Petty. There's a certain question Usher should be asked at Ben's trial, and he couldn't answer it if he was dead."

"Killing Usher wouldn't give you back those three years at Yuma," Doc said. "It would just mean more trouble, all around."

A cynical smile slanted Tennant's lean face. "The world is full of trouble," he said musingly. "Especially Bunchgrass Basin."

"How about identifying the boot prints?" Medwick asked. "How we going to do that?"

"Dutch Vedder makes boots for most of the men in this country," Tennant explained. "He keeps a foot book with the exact outlines of his customer's feet, right and left. As coroner you've got a legal right to examine that book, and compare the measurements."

MEDWICK peered thoughtfully at Tennant. "Usher and Cleek passed me on the road at dusk yesterday," he said. "They might've taken the side trail to the Roman Four afterward. If either one of them made those prints you'd have something definite to offer as evidence that your story is true."

"Yeah," Tennant agreed, "something a thick-headed jury might understand, in case Ben Petty is arrested for killing. But keep it quiet, Doc. Don't let Lambert know about it, or anyone else."

Doc nodded, and was leaving the room when a new thought struck him.

"Say," he exclaimed, "if we prove Usher framed Petty we'd know he also framed you!"

"And how surprised we'd all be," Tennant said mockingly.

When Medwick went into the lobby a moment later, Tennant heard Big Sid Stromberg say:

"I been looking for you, Doc. My hand is all swelled up and feels like there's a broken bone. My nose feels the same way."

They went outside then and Tennant wondered worriedly how long Big Sid had been in the lobby. If the saloonman had overhead that conversation, it could mean trouble.

When Tennant stepped into the lobby he found Joe Barlow lounging there.

"How long was Stromberg in here before Doc came out?" Tennant asked.

"Sid had just come in," Joe said. "He'd been to Doc's house lookin' for him."

Tennant loosed a sigh of relief. The mismatched boot angle wouldn't be worth much if Usher heard about it. It was the only shred of evidence that could be offered to show that the TU boss had stopped at the Roman Four last night, and it would be effective only if Usher denied stopping there.

"I'm staying in town for a few days," Tennant said. "How about fixing me up with a front room?"

"Sure, sure—anything you want," Joe declared, and when he handed Tennant a key, he asked softly, "When you goin' to start puttin' the run on that TU bunch, Jeff?"

"What gave you that idea?" Tennant asked.

Barlow winked grinningly. "Just puttin' two and two together and makin' 'em equal Roman Four. I heard that Leona Bell is goin' to drive the TU off Tonto Flats, and that Ben Petty is goin' to help her. That means fightin' in the Tailholts, which means you'll be in on it." He lowered his voice. "That's my country, too, Jeff. I shouldn't of ever left it. I'm throwin' in with you and Ben and Leona Bell when the shootin' starts."

So that's why Effie had wanted a promise, Tennant reflected. He chuckled,

thinking how ridiculous a setup Joe was suggesting—a girl-bossed crew, a fugitive homesteader, and a boozy old cowman stacked up against the TU's tough gunhawk bunch.

"I guess you got your reports mixed up," Tennant told him. "I don't think Ben Petty will be helping the Bar Bell, and neither will I. We'll be too busy helping ourselves."

Then, because the bruised knuckles of his hands were sore and commencing to swell, he went out to the kitchen and announced:

"I could use a pitcher of real hot water."

Ten minutes later, as he stood at the washstand soaking his hands in steaming water, Leona Bell came to the doorway of his room.

"Without your whiskers you look exactly like Jeff Tennant," she said in friendly fashion.

Her smile was good to see, and when he said, "Without your scowl you look exactly like Leona Bell," her tinkling laughter was good to hear.

It was a surprising thing. She was wearing the same clothes she had worn yesterday, but she seemed to be a different person—a cheerful, gracious sister of the haughty girl he had met at Commissary Creek.

Leona came into the room and glanced at his hands.

"They say you gave Big Sid a proper licking," she said. "I hope you didn't cripple yourself doing it."

Tennant shook his head. "Just a trifle sore is all."

He was reaching for a towel when she asked: "How would you like to own one hundred head of Bar Bell cows and five blooded bulls?"

Tennant's hand didn't reach the towel. He turned slowly and stared at her.

"Say that again."

"How would you like to own one hundred head of young heifers and your pick of five Bar Bell bulls?"

TENNANT wiped his wet hands. He took out his Durham sack and shaped up a cigarette. "She means it," he thought. "She means it sure as I'm alive."

"That," Leona said quietly, "is the price I'm willing to pay if you'll ramrod my fight against the TU."

When Tennant lit his cigarette and took a long drag without speaking, she added:

"Not only willing, but glad to pay." And she was smiling when she said it.

For a moment then, as all his discarded dreams came trooping back, Jeff Tennant was tempted to say yes, to accept the offer without telling her he had already decided to kill Tate Usher. One hundred cows would give him a calf crop of around seventy-five calves the first year. That much breeder stock would put him far ahead of where he would have been if he hadn't gone to Yuma. It would help pay off for Claude Bell's part in sending him to prison.

But finally Tennant said, "I guess you haven't heard that I intend to kill Tate Usher."

"I've heard you intend to try it. But I'm offering you a much better proposition. Unless you plan to drygulch Usher you wouldn't have a chance. You'd be up against Idaho Cleek, and he's too fast for you. Even if by some miracle you managed to kill Usher and live, you'd still have nothing to show for it except some satisfaction. And you can't get far on that. Satisfaction is all right for a trail tramp whose highest ambition is to own a silver-mounted saddle. But you're no trail tramp."

Tennant grinned. "How would you know that?" he inquired.

"Ben Petty told me all about your plans to buy blooded bulls and have the best small herd in Arizona Territory. According to Ben you used to have more

fancy plans for the future than any ten men in the Tailholt Hills."

"So," Tennant said, admiring her frankness, and her bargaining ability.

She had picked the one inducement that would surely tempt him to change his plans. She was like a high-stake gambler pushing in a stack of blue chips.

"I have ambition also," Leona said.

She wasn't smiling now. Yet—and Tennant couldn't understand why this was so—she was close to being beautiful when she said angrily:

"I want to see the TU shrunk back to its original size, to the sorry, shirt-tail outfit it was fifteen years ago!"

It occurred to Tennant that he had never considered anger in women an aid to beauty. It usually worked the other way. But this girl's anger was like a flame, so elemental that it warmed her thoroughly, as a woman in love might be warmed. Color came swiftly into her face; her eyes took on a tawny, gold-flecked glow. Even her lips seemed redder and fuller. Recalling how consistently peaceable a man her father had been, Tennant marveled that Claude Bell's daughter should be so hot-tempered.

"What makes you think I could accomplish the chore?" he asked.

"Because you're tough," Leona told him. "I saw it in your eyes yesterday. You've shaved off your whiskers since then, and put on a clean shirt. But you haven't changed your eyes." Then she said, "There's another reason why I want you to ramrod the fight. It's because you despise Tate Usher almost as much as I do."

"Almost as much?"

She nodded. "No one else has so much reason to despise him. You and I have kindred ambitions, Jeff, and we may both realize them—if you'll take the job."

"I still don't see why you're so sure," Tennant countered. "Even if I was an expert I'd be just one more gun on your side."

"But that one gun would be to my crew what Idaho Cleek's gun is to Usher's crew. Don't you see, Jeff? It isn't just a case of being willing to defend a ranch. That's been the trouble with Jules Huffmeyer all along. He insisted on playing the game according to the rules. But Usher doesn't play that way. He uses every trick he can think of—dirty, underhanded tricks that scare folks into letting the TU hog the grass. We've got to fight him the same way, and you're the man to do it."

She watched Tennant's slow, self-mocking smile, and liked it.

"You see," she added, "I know much more about you than I did yesterday."

"Maybe more than I knew myself, yesterday," Tennant said reflectively. "I didn't know I was still ambitious."

"Then you'll take the job?" Leona asked eagerly.

[*Turn page*]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

JEFF TENNANT walked over to the window, tossed his dead cigarette into the street and began fashioning a fresh one.

"Seems like you're offering a high price," he muttered. "Especially when you know I planned to go gunning for Usher on my own."

Leona shook her head. "The price isn't high, considering that the Bar Bell will be crowded out of business unless I stop the TU. In fact I stand to lose a lot of cattle this winter without that graze on Tonto Flats. And as for your personal fight with Usher, well, you'd have to catch him away from Cleek, which is next to impossible. Even if you should, I doubt if Usher would fight you, man to man. Did you ever hear of him doing his own gun work?"

"No," Tennant admitted.

"Then it adds up to this," Leona went on in the matter-of-fact tone of a merchant itemizing a bill of goods. "If you go after Usher your way you risk being killed by Cleek without a chance of winning a thing. If you do it my way you'll be helping me save the Bar Bell from sure ruin, and you'll have a chance to turn the Roman Four into a well-stocked ranch. Either way you risk your hide, I'll admit—but as my ramrod you'd get paid for taking the risk."

"If the Bar Bell won," Tennant pointed out. "Otherwise no."

Leona nodded. She studied him for a long moment, as if attempting to tally the results of her argument. Then she said:

"If you ask my crew what our chances are they'll ask you who Usher's bunch ever beat. Even Ben Petty thinks we've got a chance to win."

Tennant smiled. "So does Joe Barlow," he said. And presently, as if thinking aloud, he muttered, "They might be right, at that. They just barely might be."

"There's a way you can find out for sure," Leona suggested.

"Yeah."

She waited out an interval of silence. Then she asked, softly: "Will you take the job?"

"Yes," Tennant said.

Which was when Doc Medwick came to the doorway and announced:

"You certainly did a job on Big Sid. He'll be tending bar one-handed a month or more."

"Too bad for the Saturday night trade," Tennant said. "Service will be slow." Then he asked, "What's the verdict, Doc?" And when Medwick glanced questioningly at Leona, Tennant said, "It's all right for her to hear. She's just hired me to ramrod the Bar Bell's fight against the TU."

Medwick stared at them in frank astonishment. "She has?" he demanded. Then he said wearily, "God help us all."

"Doc, you sound awfully pessimistic," Leona protested.

"What can you expect from a man who has to clean up the messes other men make?" Tennant asked.

He watched Medwick take off his glasses and clean them. Doc, he reflected, had never been happy about having him court Jane. Now the old medico would be even less enthusiastic.

"Well, what did you find out?" Tennant finally asked.

"The prints were made by Usher," Medwick said. "He's got mismatched feet. . . ."

Fall haze lay powder-blue all across the Tailholt Hills. At sundown a chill breeze came off Dragoon Divide, bringing a hint of winter to Ben Petty who was scouting the timber above his homestead. He hadn't eaten since breakfast and was hungry, but because he had seen two riders near here an hour ago, Petty disliked the risk of obtaining food at his shack. The whole TU crew would be cruising these hills by now.

Dusk came and a stronger breeze stirred the pines to restless sighing. The day's worry and waiting had

rubbed Petty's nerves raw. He glanced frequently over his shoulder, and when he began a cautious circle of the clearing he drew his gun, holding it ready for the rush of riders he half expected. And wholly feared.

He made a complete turn of the clearing and halted again, not quite satisfied. Those two riders he had glimpsed from a distance had headed toward the Bar Bell. But they might have doubled back. They might be in the shack now, waiting for him to show himself.

The gun's hickory handle felt slippery in his fingers, he sheathed the weapon, wiped his perspiring palm against his pants, and peered across the clearing. The thought came to him that he had lived alone in that cheerless shack for a long time and never known real loneliness. But he knew it now, the loneliest feeling a man could have—the feeling of being hunted.

FOR a time then, as Ben Petty waited for his courage to equal his hunger, fragmentary impressions of the day's occurrences came back to him. Jeff Tennant's scoffing declaration that the truth was too simple. Leona Bell's surprise at learning of Jeff's return, and the pleased way she had said, "So that's who I met yesterday!" And Doc Medwick's worried voice as he drove off toward Roman Four saying, "There'll be the devil to pay."

Recalling how he had been tempted to tell the old medico about the bullet-holes, Petty wondered if he had done right by following Jeff Tennant's peculiar instructions. Jeff had a tough and cocksure way. He had always been a high-riding galoot. Going to jail, Ben guessed, hadn't changed him much, except to make him tougher. Perhaps it would have been better to tell Doc the whole story, straight out.

Petty was worrying about that when he heard horses come down the slope north of his shack. A breeze was blowing directly toward him and so the sound of travel was plain even though the horses were some distance away.

His first impulse was to ride in swift retreat. He was whirling his bronc when he heard another rider off to the west. That halted him at once. It meant they were spread out and he might run into more riders coming in from the east and south.

Petty shivered, and drew his gun.

"That you, Idaho?" he heard Tate Usher call.

Cleek's muttered reply came from a point close to the shack, and another man—Petty thought it sounded like Red Naviska—declared:

"He wouldn't dillydally around here. The Bar Bell is the place to watch, and them homesteads in the Bandoleers."

"We split up and watch 'em all," Idaho Cleek announced, "after we have us a bait of food."

Ben Petty listened for sound of travel behind him. Presently he heard Dude Finn inquire:

"You plannin' to catch Petty, or kill him?"

Ben waited, wanting to hear the answer, and shivering a little.

"Shoot him down on sight, just like he shot poor Ed!" he heard Tate Usher proclaim.

"That's all I need to know," Finn said happily. "I never liked that jigger nohow."

Ben Petty cursed softly. Dude was another one who had acted fresh with Rose; another smart alecky son too big for his britches.

There was more talk, but Ben didn't wait to hear it. He eased his horse deeper into the pines. When he looked back there was lamplight at the shack, and later, as he rimmed the ridge, the light still showed.

Those men would soon be eating supper, filling themselves at his table and with his food. The hunger grind in Petty's stomach got worse. He won-

dered where Sheriff Lambert and the other TU riders were. They might be anywhere, watching any trail, waiting for him to make a move.

He held his gun ready, and rode toward Quadrille. A man had to eat.

VI

SUPPER was over, the dishes washed and put away, and Doc Medwick had departed, saying something about a friendly poker game. Tennant sat with Jane on the front porch, watching the way the window lamplight revealed the contours of her face each time she turned her head to look directly at him.

She was, he decided, lovelier than she had been three years ago; more womanly, and therefore more desirable. He felt for her hand and found it.

"It's good to be back," he said.

"Good to have you back," Jane murmured. During supper she had listened without comment to her father's pessimistic predictions regarding the Bar Bell's chances against the TU. Now she said, "So you're to be Leona's fighting foreman."

There was no censure in her voice. But there was no pleasure in it either.

"Any objections, ma'am?" Tennant asked.

Jane shook her head. "I've no right to object."

It was, he knew, her way of reminding him that there had been no definite understanding between them.

"It's a chance to settle my score with Usher," he said. "I'd planned to do it in a more direct and quicker way, but Ben Petty's mixup changed that. Ben branded calves for me and so I'm trying to return the favor. There's only one way to clear him of Peebles' murder if he's arrested—by having Tate Usher testify that he wasn't at the Roman Four last night, and then proving he was."

"I can understand all that," Jane said. "But I can't understand how Leona Bell could talk you into becoming a hired gunslinger, even for a hundred head of cattle."

Tennant shrugged. He didn't entirely understand it himself. It was, he supposed, a combination of things—the fact he'd had to alter his original plans because of Ben Petty, and the realization that Usher probably couldn't be goaded into a gun duel. But the real reason was the bait Leona Bell had used, the bargain that had renewed his discarded dreams.

"I'm gambling my time for a bunch of cattle," he said, knowing how flimsy an explanation this made to Jane.

"You're gambling your reputation," she reminded him, "and perhaps your life."

Tennant chuckled. "Do you think being the Bar Bell's ramrod would hurt a brand blotter's reputation? Don't forget that I'm an ex-convict, Jane, a culprit who's paid his debt to society."

"I know, Jeff, and I don't blame you for being bitter. It's—well, I can't understand your being willing to fight for pay."

"According to Doc's predictions I'm not," Tennant said. "If the Bar Bell loses there won't be any pay."

For a time then, while Jane sat with her face half-shadowed and half-lighted, Tennant studied the profile of her lips, deliberately tantalizing himself with their remembered sweetness and what they could do to him. They weren't shaped in a cupid's bow like Rose Barlow's lips. They had a longer, softer curve that was more pleasantly expressive.

Idly comparing her with Rose, Tennant understood another thing about this girl who sat so quietly beside him. There was a quality in Jane that made a man remember his manners, a sort of obscure dignity, so that she could look a man in the eye and understand what he was thinking and not blush. And not

seem brazen.

Jane turned her head and said, "A penny for your thoughts."

"I was thinking," Tennant told her, "how nice it would be to kiss you."

"So?"

While he held her in his arms and felt the lessening pressure her breathing made against his chest, Tennant knew again what he had known the first time he had kissed her. Jane had an outward calm that was like the smooth flow of deep-running water, unruffled by all the turbulence below its surface. But there were strong currents of emotion in her, a flood tide of affection waiting for the man she married.

"Another penny for your thoughts," Jane offered.

"The man was thinking how much he'd like to ask the girl to marry him," Tennant said. "The man was telling himself it would be the first thing he'd do when he owns a fitting home for so beautiful a bride."

He watched the way her slow smile gently curved her lips. He heard the remote rumor of a horse somewhere west of the Big Arroyo bridge, and was wondering about its rider when Jane said softly:

"The girl isn't particular about the house. It's the man she'd be marrying, and there's no reason for him to be overly proud about wordly goods, one way or the other."

TENNANT kissed her again, long and hard. He breathed in the feminine scent of her hair, knowing it was the most delicious perfume he had ever smelled; the most intimate. He kissed the tip of her nose, and her ear and the soft hollow below it.

As horse hoofs bonged on the bridge planks, he said:

"I've seen what happens to beautiful brides on hardscrabble homesteads, honey. I'm going to have a real ranch when I ask a girl to marry me—or I'll not be asking."

Then Ben Petty halted his horse in the long shaft of lamplight.

"Is Jeff Tennant there?" he called nervously.

"What you doing here, Ben?" he demanded.

"They got me shut off from my shack and from the Bar Bell," Petty reported. "I'm going to get some grub at the Senate. Sheriff Sam ain't come back, has he?"

"Haven't seen him," Tennant said.

"I passed Tay McGonigle up the road a piece. He says Kid Peebles swore out a warrant for my arrest and that Sam seems to think I killed Ed. Reckon your story will clear me, when you tell the whole of it."

Tennant nodded.

Petty smiled and said, "Then mebbe I'd best give myself up—if you're sure."

"I'm not sure at all," Tennant said quickly, wanting to emphasize this. "Usher might be smart enough to spoil our ace in the hole, and there's no telling what a jury will do. Look what they did to me. No, Ben, I'm not sure at all."

Petty thought about this, looking worried, and rubbing a thumb up and down his bristled chin. "Cussed if I know what to do," he muttered. "If I give myself up they might convict me of killin'. If I don't, one of them TU slug-slammers is liable to shoot me down like a dog."

The sound of a wagon came from the quilted darkness west of Big Arroyo.

"That's McGonigle," Petty said, bringin' in Peebles' remains." He buttoned his denim jacket. "Nights are gittin' cold." He listened to the wagon as it rumbled across the bridge, then asked, "What would you do, Jeff?"

Tennant frowned, not liking this. "I'd make them hunt me down, and maybe I'd do some hunting myself," he thought. "It'd be fight and run and

fight some more."

But Ben Petty wasn't much of a fighter. The lanky, loose-jointed homesteader had lost his urge for conflict the moment he learned of Ed Peebles' death. Lacking a motive for revenge or for protecting Rose Barlow's honor, he had no strong prop against the increasing pressure of apprehension and discomfort.

"I'd probably make 'em catch me," Tennant said.

The wagon came closer, its wheels rolling quietly through the road's deep dust.

"If I could make it to Hobo Bill Wimple's place up under the rim they'd never get me," Petty said. "Guess that's where I'll head for, first thing tomorrow morning. I'm tireder'n six Sonora steers and twice as hungry."

"I'll fix you some supper in a jiffy," Jane called from the veranda.

Petty shook his head. "Thanks just the same, ma'am, but—well, I sort of wanted to see Rose."

Tennant grinned. Ben would never be too tired nor too worried to visit Rose Barlow.

"You'd better ride down Sashay Alley," he suggested, "and go into the hotel by the kitchen door."

"Sure," Ben agreed, and was climbing into saddle when McGonigle's team came into the shaft of lamplight.

"Howdy, Tay," Tennant called and at this same instant Sheriff Lambert jumped from the wagon, spooking Ben's bronc against the fence.

"Ride off, Ben—ride off!" Tennant said.

But Petty took a moment to think about this, and then Lambert rushed up.

"You're under arrest!" he announced.

Petty went altogether slack in saddle.

"I didn't have a thing to do with Peebles' death," he said. "Honest I didn't."

"That's the jury's chore," Lambert muttered. "Climb down, Ben. I'm taking you to jail."

Tennant had stepped back along the fence so that he was out of the lamplight.

"You might be wrong about that, Sam," he said.

"Wrong how?" Lambert demanded, peering into the darkness where Tennant stood.

"All wrong," Tennant said. He glanced at Petty, seeing how dejectedly Ben slumped, and said, "You don't have to go with him."

FOR a moment then the breathing of McGonigle's team was a plain sound. Jane, standing on the veranda steps, heard the slight creak of leather as Ben Petty straightened in saddle. Then Sheriff Lambert shouted:

"Oh, yes he does!"

And the loudness of the lawman's voice told Jane that Lambert was afraid.

She looked at Jeff, seeing his high, indistinct shape in the shadows by the fence. "He has no right to interfere," she thought, and heard Jeff say, "Not unless you want to, Ben. Not unless you want to."

It was a strange thing. Lambert ignored Ben completely. He kept peering at Jeff, his head canted to one side and his right hand close to holster.

"You try interferin' and I'll take you to jail with him," Lambert warned.

"I guess not," Tennant said in a quiet, almost casual tone. "I guess you'll never take me in for anything."

Jane held her breath, expecting Lambert to draw his gun, and fearing that Jeff would shoot him if he did. It didn't occur to her that Jeff might be hurt if this came to a showdown. There was just one thought in her mind now, and one fear—the awful fear of seeing Jeff shoot Sheriff Lambert.

She tried to tell herself that Jeff was bluffing, that he wouldn't kill a blundering old man who was merely doing his

duty. But she kept remembering how the hardness stayed in Jeff's eyes, even when he smiled.

"Ben—why don't you go along with Sheriff Sam?" she called urgently, and loosed a sigh as Ben dismounted, saying meekly, "I'll go, Sam—but I'd like to stop by the hotel for supper."

"Sure, sure," Lambert agreed, plainly pleased to turn away from Tennant. "Just tie your bronc behind Tay's wagon with mine, and we'll go eat."

Presently, when Lambert and Petty walked down Main Street and McGonigle's wagon followed them, Tennant came back to the veranda.

"Ben is probably better off in jail," he muttered. He won't have to decide anything there. They'll do it for him." Then he added, "Blast a man who won't grab a good chance when he gets it."

Jane watched him shape up a cigarette and light it, his face showing a deep frown in the match flare.

"But why should Ben run if he's innocent?" she asked. "Why should he live like a hunted thing and risk being shot?"

"Because that's better than being in prison, or tromping thin air with a rope around your neck," Tennant said.

Jane thought about that, wanting to see his side of it, wanting to believe he was right. But she recalled how Lambert had looked, standing there with his splayed fingers close to holster. The old lawman had been trapped between fear and pride, and there had been no doubt in his mind about Jeff bluffing. Lambert had been afraid. Afraid of dying.

"Did Judge Maffit beat Luke Randall again in the last election?" Tennant asked.

Jane nodded, watching his lamplit face ease into a smile.

"Why does that please you, Jeff?"

"Because Ben needs a lawyer who has reason to dislike Tate Usher," Tennant said cheerfully. He took her arm and escorted her toward the gate. "I'd better line up Randall right now," he said. "I'll be leaving town early in the morning."

"Going to your new job so soon?" Jane asked, showing her disappointment in the way her fingers tightened on his arm.

Tennant nodded. They were at the gate now, and Jane said, "You really think there's a chance for you to win those cattle, don't you Jeff?"

"Sure," Tennant agreed, and because he didn't want her to worry about him, he used Leona's argument to prove his point. "Usher's toughs have never licked anyone. They've bluffed their way through every deal, without a fight. We're going to ram that bluff right down their gullets and make 'em eat it."

A wistful smile dimpled Jane's lamplit cheeks. "You remind me of a poem I once read, Jeff. It goes something like this, 'Rebels ride proudly in the sun, counting the battle already won.' "

"Nice," Tennant praised. He traced the sweet, full curve of her lips with a forefinger. "Nice enough to kiss. . . ."

DOC MEDWICK came home shortly after ten o'clock and found Jane alone on the veranda.

"I thought Jeff would be here," Doc said, disappointed.

"He went to see Lawyer Randall about defending Ben Petty," Jane reported. "Jeff is leaving for the Bar Bell first thing in the morning. Was there something special you wanted to tell him, Dad?"

"Yes. I want to warn him he's got off on the wrong foot around here. Lambert is all spooked up. He's saying Jeff threatened to draw a gun on him. Did Jeff do that?"

"Well, I suppose it amounted to a threat," Jane admitted reluctantly, and told what had transpired out there by the fence. Then she asked in a thoroughly subdued voice, "Do you think

Jeff was bluffing?"

Instead of answering, Doc asked, "Do you?"

Jane was silent for a long moment. "I don't know, Dad," she finally said. "I just don't know."

And something in her voice prompted Doc Medwick to place an arm around her.

"I guess there always was a wild streak in Jeff," he muttered. "Three years in prison brought it to the surface, and heaven only knows what will cure it."

They went into the lamplit parlor and Doc saw his daughter's eyes. "He isn't worth the salt in one of your tears, baby," he said. "Not one."

Jeff Tennant was also the topic of conversation at the Bar Bell, where Jules Huffmeyer and his five-man crew listened to Leona's announcement of Tennant's hiring.

"He'll be here tomorrow," she said, "to take complete charge of things until the TU is pushed back where it belongs."

Huffmeyer, sat rigidly straight because of his tight-bound ribs.

"Tennant never struck me as bein' overly tough," he said sourly. "It'll take more'n a smart alecky galoot with a gun to run this ruckus, once it starts."

And "Bravo" Shafter, who had been acting as straw boss since Jules' accident, muttered:

"Seems odd for us to be takin' orders from a Tailholt Hills homesteader, ma'am. Tol'able odd."

"But you'll take them, regardless," Leona said confidently. "And you'll find out soon enough that he's the man to give them." A reflective smile brought its brief change to her face and she added, "Jeff Tennant is tough, through and through. . . ."

Well fortified with one of Effie Barlow's bounteous breakfasts and by Tay McGonigle's generous application of horse liniment to his bruised shoulder, Jeff Tennant saddled his sorrel gelding before sunup.

" 'Tis the one regret of me life that I missed seein' ye rock Big Sid to shleep yesterday," McGonigle complained. And presently, as Tennant led his horse out to the street, Tay warned, "Keep an eye peeled for them TU toughs, Jeff. They'll gang up on ye, first chance they git."

Tennant grinned. "I could whip Usher's bunch with a broom handle this morning," he declared. "Will you do me a little favor, Tay?"

"And why the divil wouldn't I?"

"Then stop by the jail soon as they open the front door, and tell Ben to keep his lip buttoned tight until Lawyer Randall comes in to see him."

"Consider it done," Tay said.

Tennant rode west on Main Street, sitting tall in the saddle and feeling better than he had felt for many a day. Part of this exuberance, he knew, was the result of his talk with Luke Randall last night. The lawyer, who had been defeated in three successive elections by the narrow margin of TU's votes going to Judge Maffit, had displayed a frank eagerness to take Ben's case. And he had seemed highly optimistic about the evidence.

When Tennant passed Doc Medwick's white house he gave it a lingering regard, savoring the pleasant memories this place held for him. Jane, he believed, wouldn't be greatly influenced by her father's pessimistic predictions. She had a mind of her own. She had showed that four years ago when she had gone against her father's choice of Clark Morgan as a prospective son-in-law.

Tennant grinned, recalling how meekly the mercantile proprietor had stepped aside. Morgan might know all there was to know about making money, but he sure had a lot to learn when it came to winning a wife.

The sorrel bronc settled down to the

leisurely, established pace of a long trail traveler. Early sunlight spilled over the eastern rim of the basin. Dew made a tinseled sparkle on the grass and a gentle breeze brought the thin-spiced scent of pine from timbered hills.

For the first time in three years Tennant whistled a cheery tune. This, he reflected, was the way it used to be. He had always felt high as a windmill when he rode out in the morning. If it was chilly and a bronc pitched with him he would whoop and holler for the sheer joy of being where he wanted to be and doing what he wanted to do. No ride had been too long, nor work too hard, in those days. He had dreamed big dreams and worked to make them materialize—until a range hog's scheme had stopped him.

Tennant ceased his whistling.

"Tate Usher," he said, in the whispering way of a man uttering a curse.

The mere mention of Usher's name curdled his thoughts. It dimmed the morning sunlight and spoiled the air he breathed.

VII

THE sorrel held steadily to his running walk, hoofs scuffing the road's powdery dust. He had a habit of traveling with his ears back, as if perpetually resenting the burden he carried, and because of this characteristic, Tennant had named him Sulky.

Now Tennant noticed that Sulky's ears were tipped forward. Halting at once, Tennant listened, and heard nothing. But the sorrel kept his ears pricked and so Tennant waited, keening the crisp morning air. The thought came to him that Usher's riders wouldn't know that Ben was in jail and so would continue to search for him.

Tennant scanned the country ahead without finding sign of riders, but he waited, relying entirely on the sorrel's continuing alertness. This was some six miles west of town, in a rock-jumbled stretch of desert where *saguaro* cactus grew tall above patches of prickly pear and greasewood.

He shaped up a cigarette and had it half-smoked when he caught the sharp flash of sunlight slanting off metal. Presently he glimpsed three hats above the brush. Watching them come toward him he saw that one hat band was decorated with silver conchas, and recalled that Tate Usher invariably wore such an ornamented band.

Tennant backed his horse against a rock outcrop at the roadside. He watched the three riders come into full view, identifying Tate Usher, Idaho Cleek and Red Naviska.

It occurred to him that this was not the way he had hoped to meet Usher. And in the brief interval between the time they saw him and then recognized him, Tennant realized how correct

[*Turn page*]

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Leona Bell's prediction had been. There probably would never be a time when that fat, flabby, hog-jowled man would ride alone, or walk alone, or fight alone.

"So you're back!" Usher exclaimed.

His eyes, deeply recessed in pouchy folds of flesh, were like bright blue marbles in a slot. There was no sign of embarrassment at this meeting with the man he had tricked into prison, nor any regret.

Anger poured its scalding heat into Tennant's veins while he considered this, and for a moment he just sat there, peering at the living image of his long-nourished hatred.

"I came back to kill a hog, Usher, a hog just about your size and shape," he said then.

The TU boss put up a thick-palmed hand in a defensive gesture that was pure mockery. A derisive smile rutted his heavy cheeks.

"Was that a threat, or just an insult?" he asked blandly.

And then he laughed.

Tennant's hatred now was a physical thing. It was like a hunger grind in his stomach; like a thirst in his throat, so that when he spoke his voice had a harsh, raw-toned rasp.

"A warning," he said.

Usher turned to Cleek. "You hear, Idaho? He's warning me. Fresh out of the calaboose and warning a respectable, law-abiding citizen. It ain't fair, Idaho. It ain't right."

Tennant paid Cleek strict attention, knowing how this would start—if it started. Cleek's eyes continued their unblinking appraisal. He was shrewd and he was cautious, and there was no pride in him, Tennant thought; no vanity. Yet Cleek showed a deliberate and thorough arrogance in the way he ignored Usher. If Cleek took orders from Tate there was no sign of it. A stranger, Tennant reflected, would have difficulty guessing which was owner and which was foreman. And a stranger would probably guess wrong.

"We've got no time for talk," Cleek said flatly.

There was nothing especially formidable in the brief glance he gave Naviska, nor in the way he eased his horse a step to the left. But Tennant thought instantly, "Cleek knows the odds will never be better than they are right now," and wondered if Cleek's milky eyes had held that same blank, unblinking stare when they had peered at Mac Menafee over a blasting gun. They were the eyes of a man who could kill without anger.

"So you came back for some more trouble," Cleek said, speaking with such deliberate slowness that sunlight made a steady glint on his gold teeth. "Well, you've found it, Tennant."

"Trouble a-plenty," Red Naviska bragged.

WICKED anticipation burned in Naviska's green-gray eyes. It flushed his wedge-shaped face and compressed his lips so that twin trickles of tobacco juice dribbled from the corners of his mouth. He was, Tennant thought, more dangerous in some ways than Cleek, for he had a bully's false pride and a bully's need for conflict.

"All the gol-blasted trouble you'll ever want," Naviska added insolently.

"All Usher will ever want, also," Tennant said.

"How's that?" Usher demanded. "What you mean by that, Tennant?"

Tennant ignored him. He said to Cleek, "I might not match your draw, but I'll have time for one shot at Usher, regardless. And he's too big a target for me to miss."

Cleek thought about that. His eyelids tightened perceptibly.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe not." Then, without shifting his glance from Tennant, he said, "Somebody coming east, Red. Go see who it is."

Tennant hadn't heard a sound. He

was wondering how Cleek could have heard anything when he noticed that the horses' heads were turned, ears pricked forward. Cleek had observed that instantly. All his senses were honed to the fine edge of an animal's alertness and he was as sharp as a man could be.

Red Naviska gigged his horse up the road.

"I don't like to have unfriendly neighbors, Tennant," Usher said. "I'll make you a price on what's left of your burned-out place."

"Here's a better proposition," Tennant offered, and kept Cleek on the fringe of his vision. "Just beat my draw right now, and the Roman Four is yours."

Usher didn't like this at all.

"You're loco," he said, frowning, and glanced at Cleek as if to assure himself that Cleek was fully alert.

The TU foreman sat easy in saddle, his contemplative eyes showing no change. But the position of his right hand had changed, so that now his thumb was hooked on the belt fold of his holster.

"You talk real tough, jailbird," he said flatly.

Tennant's right hand was within four inches of his gun, and that margin of separation seemed hugely important. He had an almost overwhelming urge to move his hand closer, but he fought it down, sensing that his slightest move now would be the signal for Cleek's draw, and guessing how slim a chance he stood of matching it.

"Somebody coming," Usher said nervously.

Tennant heard the soft tinkle of a bell. He was making his own estimate of that sound when Naviska came back and reported:

"Hobo Bill with his pack outfit."

"Let's get on into town," Usher suggested at once. "We're way late for breakfast."

The plain note of apprehension in Usher's voice stirred secret amusement in Tennant. Tate wasn't liking that talk about being a big target. The man was yellow to the core.

"All right," Cleek said, and motioned for Usher and Naviska to go on ahead of him. Then he rode slowly past Tennant, saying, "Some other time."

"Sure," Tennant agreed.

"Hobo Bill" Wimple came up, riding a roan mule and driving four burros ahead of him. The lead burro wore a small, sweet-toned bell that tinkled merrily to each mincing step.

"Sure surprisin' who a man'll meet on a stage road," Bill greeted, and stuck out a callused hand. "How be you, Jeff?"

"Fine," Tennant said. He eyed Hobo Bill in friendly fashion. "You don't look an hour older than that day you showed me where to find a five-prong buck, five years ago," he declared.

Bill's leathery face showed a reflective smile. "Was it that long ago?" he asked, as if genuinely surprised. "Time sure flits by a feller."

Tennant smiled, knowing that time didn't mean much to Wimple who spent his summers searching for a fabulous cache of Spanish treasure supposedly hidden high on Dragoon Divide, and loafed out his winters at Mayme Shay's parlor house. It was generally understood that Mayme had grubstaked him for years, and that their romance dated back to the hurly-burly days when Mayme had been a star performer at the Bonanza Bazaar.

This was earlier than Hobo Bill usually quit his camp on the rim, so Tennant asked:

"Did you run short of grub, or just get lonesome for the sound of Mayme's girlish laughter?"

"Neither one," Bill said, "although it'll pleasure me considerable to see Mayme again. There's a grand and glorious woman, Jeff—the finest female

from here to who hid the broom!"

"Shouldn't wonder," Jeff said, observing the bright shine that came into Bill's eyes.

WIMPLE would never be really old, Tennant guessed. He would go on praising Mayme and hunting for hidden treasure until he died.

"I had a real good reason for leavin' the rim early," Bill explained. "It's my guess there'll be snow clean down to Tonto Flats this year. Plenty snow. All the signs point to it. Look at the coat my mule is makin', and her usually slick as a shewahwah pup at this time of year. I'm bettin' it'll be a rip-roarin' winter." He added cheerfully, "But I'll be toastin' my shins at Mayme's kitchen stove, warm as a bug in a rug."

He kicked the mule into motion and followed his burros down the road.

Tennant sat for a moment watching Hobo Bill's departure. No one in Bunchgrass Basin had ever accused Wimple of doing a mean or dishonest thing, yet most men judged him harshly. Counting him a shiftless, shameless loafer, they scoffed at his treasure hunting and considered his association with Mayme Shay a fit subject for ribald jokes.

Even so, Tennant thought, some of them probably envied Bill his footloose freedom when he started out each spring, packing provisions to his camp on the rim. And although it didn't occur to them that Bill cherished Mayme more than most men cherished their wives, they begrudged him his grubstake and the generous affection that went with it.

Life, Tennant reflected, was an endless riddle. By every rule in the book Bill was a pauper, yet he possessed the highest and most elusive prize of all—genuine happiness. It was enough to make a man look twice at his hole card.

Tennant shrugged, and was turning the sorrel when he noticed a raveled-out plume of dust that looked to be about a mile north of him. Someone was traveling westward in a hurry. Acting on pure impulse Tennant dismounted, climbed the rock outcrop and from this vantage point, had his look at the stage road.

There were only two riders ahead of Bill's burros now. Tennant couldn't identify them at this distance, but he was reasonably sure that Cleek wouldn't leave Usher.

"So it's Naviska," Tennant muttered and, guessing what the redhead was up to, cursed morosely.

There was no adequate defense against ambush in this broken, brush-tangled country; no way a man could protect himself from a drygulch sneak.

Tennant climbed into saddle, rode westward, and wondered where Naviska would set his ambush trap. There were several likely places. The nearest, Tennant thought, was the ford at Commissary Creek. The north bank was high, and a drygulcher could leave his horse well back in the mesquite thickets so there would be no risk of a whinny revealing his presence.

Tennant considered the advisability of riding south of the road and crossing the creek west of the ford. If he rode at a walk there wouldn't be enough dust for Naviska to tally his change of route. But the redhead might not be waiting at the ford; he might choose any one of a dozen places. A man couldn't ride around them all, and there was no way of guessing which place to avoid.

Abruptly then it occurred to Tennant that there was one way of knowing exactly where Naviska's ambush would be; one sure, simple way. "Red won't be looking for me behind him," he thought. "He'll be watching the stage road all the time."

Tennant grinned, liking this, and rode north until he came to Naviska's trail, then followed it westward without diffi-

culty. The sign was plain, allowing him to reckon the changing speed of Red's travel by the depth and spacing of the hoofprints.

Presently glimpsing a discarded cigarette butt and a burned match, Tennant knew Naviska had halted here long enough to smoke a cigarette. Red, he supposed, had endeavored to tally some sign of travel on the road. The TU rider was probably wondering why no dust plume showed down there.

Tennant rode slowly, stopping at frequent intervals to scan the brush-covered country ahead. There was no sign of dust now, which might mean that Naviska was riding at a walk, or that he had already reached an ambush site that suited him. According to the direction of these tracks, Red was aiming for the ford at Commissary Creek.

It occurred to Tennant now that he had two choices. He could angle north of the ford and continue his journey to the Bar Bell without risk. Or he might, with a little luck, ambush an ambusher.

AT NOON Jeff Tennant found Naviska's bay bronc tied to a mesquite tree near the ford at Commissary Creek. The animal stood in the droopy, down-headed way of a foundered horse, its sweat-crusted flanks indicating that it had stood here long enough to dry out. At least half an hour, Tennant reckoned, and noticed that the scabbard on the bay's saddle was empty.

Tennant gave the roundabout brush a questing consideration. Naviska, he guessed, was waiting with a Winchester. If the redhead had discovered he was being trailed this would be a poor place to be caught afoot.

There was only one way to find out for sure. But a man had to take his chances on a deal like this. He had to play his hunches, and hope they were right.

Tennant dismounted. He tied the sorrel to a clump of catclaw, took off his spurs and hung them on the saddle-horn. Then he found Naviska's boot tracks and warily followed them.

The land here was broken by a series of shallow washes running between low, rocky ridges. Tennant calculated the distance to the stage road as being not more than an eighth of a mile, which meant that Naviska was not far off. Tennant drew his gun, crossed a stone-studded wash, and climbed the steep bank beyond it. Here he halted, crouching low and scanning the mesquite thickets ahead. The thought came to him that this was the first time he had stalked a man with a gun since the Lincoln County War. He smiled, recalling how haphazardly he had got mixed up in that affair. He had been green and gun shy when the fighting started, but mostly he had been afraid of being afraid.

Warily, with a patient stealth that guarded against stepping on a dead branch or scuffing a stone, Tennant followed Naviska's tracks into a brush-tangled arroyo and along its crooked course for several yards before climbing out. Again he halted, and narrowly regarded the low, greaswood-fringed ridge above him. That would be the logical place for Naviska to wait. The road probably cut across its southern slope.

"Now for a little luck," Tennant thought, and moved slowly up the ridge.

When he was within a few feet of the crest Tennant went to his hands and knees. He crept behind a rock outcrop, peered over it, and saw Naviska hunkered behind another outcrop directly ahead of him. Red was watching the road, and probably wondering why he'd had no target. A slow grin touched Tennant's lips.

But presently, as Naviska got up and sunlight glanced off the Winchester cradled in his arms, Tennant ceased grinning. There, except for luck, stood the man who would have shot him from

ambush as mercilessly as a skuling Apache.

For the second time this day anger ran its swift, hot course through Jeff Tennant. He held his gun on Naviska and considered crippling him. It would be an easy thing to break Red's right arm. At this distance he could target a shirt sleeve between elbow and shoulder.

"I'll teach him to play Indian," Tennant thought. He was taking deliberate aim when Naviska put down his gun and began building a cigarette. Red's right arm still made a plain target. But now, because his hands held paper and tobacco instead of a Winchester, Tennant didn't fire. There was no real difference in ethics here. The TU gunhawk was as viciously destructive as a snake at skin-shedding time. He deserved shooting on sight, without warning or mercy, yet Tennant waited for him to pick up the gun.

As if sensing surveillance, Naviska turned abruptly. His green-gray eyes bugged wide, his tobacco-stained mouth opened, and for one long moment he stared at Tennant's leveled revolver as if fascinated beyond the power of speech or movement. Then he demanded:

"How'd you get up here?"

"Followed snake sign," Tennant said.

Naviska still held the half-made cigarette. He brought the paper to his lips, licked its edge, tapered the brown paper cylinder and lit it. Then he took a deep drag of smoke.

"What in thunderation you figgerin' to do?" he asked with insolent bravado.

A moment ago Tennant couldn't have told him. But now, observing Red's attempt to play the bully rôle, Tennant understood that pride was the prop which supported this man's monumental viciousness. There was no cure for a drygulcher, save killing, but there was a way to eliminate the prop, and punish him.

"Unbuckle that gun-belt, before I do it with a bullet," Tennant ordered, and when Naviska complied, Tennant said, "Now take off your clothes."

Naviska peered at him in plain puzzlement.

"What for?" he demanded.

"So you can play Apache the way it should be played," Tennant said.

He motioned Naviska back, and gathered up Red's gun gear, strapping the holstered Colt so it hung on his left hip. Then he waggled his gun and said flatly.

"Shuck those clothes."

"No," Naviska said sullenly. "You can't make me do that!"

"Maybe not," Tennant muttered, and stepped close. "But I can do it for you."

He raised his gun, and held it as a man would hold a quirt poised for striking.

"You'll strip easy, asleep," he said, and slashed at Naviska's head.

VIII

NAVISKA dodged, evading the down-swung gun barrel, but Tennant stuck out a boot and tripped him. Red fell on his back and Tennant stepped astride him at once. When Naviska tried to get up, Tennant booted him back, hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

Red's face turned pale and wildness burned in his round, hot eyes. He inhaled deeply, his pulled-in cheeks giving his narrow face a wolfish ferocity. But he made no further move.

"Which one of us takes off your clothes, Red?" Tennant asked.

"Me," Naviska muttered.

"Then get at it," Tennant ordered, and stepped aside.

Naviska took off his shirt. He watched Tennant pick up the rifle.

"I was just keepin' watch for Ben Petty, was all," he said.

"Expecting him to come from town," Tennant scoffed. "Like fun you were."

Naviska shrugged. He stepped out of his pants and stood in sweat-stained

underwear, until Tennant said impatiently:

"All of it, Red."

"You mean bare naked?" Red demanded.

"Every stitch," Tennant said, and watched Naviska shed his underwear.

The thought came to Tennant that Naviska didn't look tough at all without his clothes. From the neck down his skin was suet pale, except for skimpy patches of reddish hair. He looked gawky, now; looked almost timid. Tennant grinned, knowing it was unlikely that Red would reach the TU without running into some of the riders who were searching for Ben Petty. In which case Red would never live this down.

Tennant picked up Naviska's clothes and rolled them into a bundle.

"Now you can sneak around like a real Apache," he said, and walked back across the crest.

"I'll pay you for this!" Naviska called in a rage-clotted voice. "I'll pay you double!"

Tennant rummaged in the bundle of clothes, took a knife from Naviska's pants, and tossed it to him.

"Cut yourself a bow and arrow, Red!" he called.

Naviska picked up the knife. He opened it and absently tested the sharpness of its blade with his thumb. Presently he walked to the north rim of the ridge and watched Tennant tie the bundle of clothes behind the bay bronc's saddle. Then, as Tennant rode off leading the TU bronc, Naviska cursed him in the toneless, repeating way of a man talking to himself. . . .

When Tennant reached the Bar Bell road he dismounted, took the bundle of clothes from Naviska's saddle and tossed it into the brush. Then he unbuckled Red's gun gear, sent it after the bundle, and turned the bay loose, reasonably sure that the animal would head for home. There was a chance that some TU rider would intercept the bay, take him in tow and subsequently find Naviska. But even so, Red would have to ride in the raw.

Tennant chuckled, and jogged on toward the Bar Bell. It seemed odd that he should be traveling this road. Three days ago it would have seemed fantastic. All he had hoped for was revenge. Now, if his luck held good, he had a chance to make a dream come true —to win a well-stocked ranch of his own, with Jane to share it. And there would be vengeance, too, for even though Tate Usher survived the impending fight, he would be ruined if the Bar Bell won.

Riding with his hat brim tilted against the sun's slanting rays, Tennant contemplated his present situation and found it good. If Ben's lawyer succeeded in revealing Usher for the scallywag he was, the fight against the TU might be made less difficult in many ways. For one thing, the Bar Bell would have an extra rider once Ben was freed. And there should be no interference from Sheriff Lambert after the TU had been exposed as an outlaw spread.

Until now Tate Usher had managed to make a show of respecting the law. His most nefarious schemes had worn a threadbare cloak of legality, and there had been no proof that he was viciously unscrupulous.

But there would be proof in plenty if Lawyer Randall maneuvered Usher into swearing he hadn't been at the Roman Four the night Ed Peebles' body was burned. Once that fact was established, and accepted by a jury, Tate Usher would be tumbled from his false throne of respectability.

A string of horses, traveling single file, crossed the road ahead of Tennant, a proud-stepping stallion leading seven mares and four colts toward Commissary Creek for their evening drink. This was the Bar Bell's home range, rolling grassland sprawled between the Tailholt Hills on the east and Apache Peak on

the west, with the towering ramparts of Dragoon Divide for a northern border. Good range, this, stocked with a better than average grade of cattle. If a man had his pick of all the breeder stuff in Bunchgrass Basin he would come here for his cows.

TENNANT was thinking about that, and of his chances to own a share of such stock, when he rode into the Bar Bell yard at sundown.

The main building was a long adobe structure with a gallery across its entire front. An ell at the north end housed the kitchen. Beyond this, across the dusty yard, was a bunkhouse, blacksmith shop and huge wagon shed.

"A real cow outfit," Tennant thought, and understood why Leona Bell was willing to fight for its survival.

Two punchers were washing at the basin outside the kitchen door. Tennant didn't recognize this pair, but he knew the three men who sat on a bench in front of the bunkhouse—Bravo Shafter, Pete Lunsford and Jack Ramsay.

"Howdy," he said, and rode past them to the horse corral, not liking their wordless, unsmiling appraisal.

It hadn't occurred to him that Leona's riders would resent his coming here. The knowledge that they did whipped up a kindred resentment.

Tennant unsaddled, turned his sorrel into the corral and hung his gear on the kak-pole. Then he sauntered over to the bunkhouse.

"Who's been repping for Huffmeyer?" he asked quietly.

Bravo Shafter stood up. "Me," he said, and his truculent tone matched the scowl on his blocky, big-nosed face.

"Then you're the one I've got to lick," Tennant said, and hit him.

It wasn't a hard blow. More like a shove, with Tennant's right fist striking soundlessly against Shafter's midriff. Not nearly as hard swung as the fist Bravo slammed at Tennant and which Tennant barely dodged. But Tennant's second—a left that landed just below Shafter's right ear—was fully loaded; a paralyzing blow that produced results at once.

Bravo's lower jaw sagged until his mouth was wide open. His big hands dropped and hung loose at his sides, so that he was as open a target as a man could be.

"Lordy, Lordy," Pete Lunsford groaned.

And Leona, watching this from the kitchen doorway with a queerly urgent anticipation, waited wide-eyed for the finishing blow.

But Tennant didn't hit Shafter again. He ignored him, and walked toward the wash bench, not looking back as Bravo slumped in the slow, knee-bending fashion of a horse lying down.

The pair at the wash bench peered at Tennant in shocked silence. He picked up the bucket, then saw Leona in the doorway. "Hello, boss-ma'am," he said.

Leona smiled.

"I see you've taken charge," she said with frank admiration, and watched as he toted the bucket across the yard and doused Shafter's blank-eyed face with water.

"Shakespeare" Smith, the bald and bearded cook who once had trod the boards of variety theatres, said slyly:

"Methinks the lady was not jesting when she said yon lancer was tough. Like Cassius, he hath a lean and hungry look."

And at the bunkhouse old Pete Lunsford muttered, "I never seen the beat of it, him crumplin' Bravo with one blow."

"He didn't learn that in no law school," Jack Ramsay said. "A man would be daft to fight that feller with his fists."

* * * * *

Johnny Peebles, Dude Finn, Lee Pardee and "Goldie" Rimbaugh ate supper at M e n a f e e Camp. Afterward they lounged on the front stoop.

"Wonder what in time became of Red," Dude Finn said.

"He was ridin' towards town with Tate and Idaho, last I saw of him," Pardee reported. "Them three has probably spent the day takin' their ease at Stromberg's bar."

Johnny Peebles got up and went over to the corral.

"That kid gives me the crawlin' creeps," Goldie Rimbaugh complained. "He's so spooky he'll be shootin' at his own shadder when the moon comes up. It ain't safe to ride within a mile of him."

They watched Johnny catch a horse.

"Funny thing we ain't seen Sheriff Sam all day," Dude said. "He must of stayed in town, figgerin' we'd ride our pants off a-chasin' Petty for him."

"Reminds me of Lincoln County," Pardee reflected. "Chisum and Murphy was supposed to be fightin' each other, but they sat on their fat rumps while jiggers like me and Bill Bonney and Doc Skurlock rampaged around from Hades to breakfast."

"Wasn't Jeff Tennant in that fracas?" Finn asked.

Pardee nodded, and glanced at Johnny Peebles.

"Tennant wasn't much older'n the kid, and just about as spooky. He was a reg'lar Fancy Dan at the start, but he toughed up fast after he got shot at a few times."

"Ain't you fellers goin' to saddle up?" Johnny Peebles called from the corral.

"It'll be dark in half an hour," Finn said. "No use rimmin' around when you can't see."

"Ain't no rush, Kid," Pardee counseled. "If Petty stayed in Bunchgrass Basin we'll find him tomorrow, or next day. But it's my guess he's hightailed for the tules."

"I don't think so," Johnny muttered. "He'd of took his town suit and Sunday hat and warbag with him if he was goin' yonderly." He got into saddle and sat there undecided for a moment. Then he asked, "Ain't none of you goin' to ride?"

"Not me," Dude Finn declared. "I'm not missin' my shut-eye two nights runnin' for nobody."

JOHNNY shrugged and rode out of the yard. Ed's death didn't mean much to Dude and the others, he guessed. Yesterday they had acted like they were all broke up over Ed being killed. They had talked big about catching Ben Petty and what would happen when they got hold of him.

But now it didn't seem to make no never mind to them, one way or the other. All they thought about was filling their gizzards and getting some shut-eye. He wondered how they could feel like eating or sleeping until Ben Petty was caught. Just thinking about the dirty, back-shooting sneak spoiled the taste of a man's vittles.

It was full dark when Johnny eased his horse down the slope north of Ben Petty's shack and saw yellow light bloom in the doorway. Someone had just lit a lamp. It might not mean anything, though. Cleek and the others were probably using the place to cook supper, or perhaps Sheriff Sam was taking a look-see around. But it just might be Petty, come back for some getaway provisions.

Johnny held his horse to a walk. There was no smell of smoke, nor sound of talk. No broncs at the hitch-rack.

Anticipation grew s t r o n g e r and stronger in him. By grab, it might be Petty, and if it was, he could square Ed's death all by himself, without any help!

The thought of it made Johnny sweat, and shiver at the same time. When he came to the yard he dismounted, drew his gun, and catfooted toward the shack. Someone was in there, all right, someone who cast a long shadow when he walked between the lamp and the window. Johnny approached the shack from the

west side and stepped up to the window. If only it was Ben Petty!

Johnny peered through the dust-peppered pane. He couldn't see the man's face, but he recognized Petty's pink-striped Sunday shirt and the blue serge pants he was pulling up. A whimpering curse slipped from Johnny's lips. He fired, and saw Petty's pants slide down. He slammed two more slugs into that tilting back.

"Just like you did it to Ed!" Johnny yelled.

He climbed into saddle, and said in a surprised way, "I done it, by grab—I done it easy!"

He was riding away from the shack when Tate Usher and Idaho Cleek came galloping up.

"What's going on?" Usher asked.

"Petty came back for his Sunday suit," Johnny said. He felt proud about this. "Just like I figgered he would."

Cleek got off his horse and went into the shack.

"What you talking about?" Usher demanded.

"I just killed Ben Petty," Johnny said.

Usher was halfway to the door. He whirled and stared at Johnny.

"The devil you did!" he exclaimed. "Petty is in jail!"

Then Idaho Cleek came to the doorway.

"It's Red Naviska, deader'n a barbecued beef," he announced.

"Red!" Johnny croaked.

"Why, you slobberin' lunatic!" Tate Usher bellowed. "You've lost me a good man!"

But Johnny wasn't listening. He ran to the doorway, peered at Red's loose-jawed face, and got sick.

"Red was worth ten like Johnny and his boozy brother," Usher said to Cleek.

"Mebbe Red is still worth something to us," Cleek said musingly.

He stepped over to Johnny. "Why'd you do it, kid?" he asked.

"I thought it was Ben Petty. He was puttin' on Ben's clothes. What would Red be doin' a thing like that for?"

"Can't figger it out," Cleek admitted.

"That don't change things one iota!" Usher declared. "Naviska is dead and this young squirt killed him—shot him in the back! They'll hang him for that, and it'll serve him right.

"Shut up, Tate," Cleek broke in. Then he said to Johnny, "Shooting an unarmed man in the back is a serious offense, Kid. You can't claim self-defense or anything."

"But I thought it was Petty!" Johnny insisted.

"That wouldn't make any difference to the law," Tate Usher scoffed. "They'd say you had no right to throw three slugs into Petty's back either."

"That's how he shot Ed," Johnny muttered. "I figgered he deserved the same."

"Bad figgerin'," Cleek said quietly. "It'll put a rope around your neck one of these days. Now listen close, Kid—and do like I tell you. . . ."

THE Bar Bell's spacious, beam-ceilinged parlor was furnished with a mahogany-and-plush elegance seldom seen so far from town. A huge fireplace rose rafter high against the south wall. In front of it a red leather lounge, and two upholstered chairs were arranged to form a cozy bay beneath a crystal chandelier.

Comparing this with the barrel-chair frugality of ranchhouses he had known, Tennant remembered his father's pet phrase for such luxury: "Eatin' high on the hog."

An oil painting in a heavy gilt frame —the life-size portrait of a strikingly beautiful woman—attracted Tennant's attention as he followed Leona across the room. The picture held a flesh-and-blood aliveness; a pulsing vitality so compelling that the dark eyes seemed to be sparkling and the lips ready to part

for frank smiling.

There was something familiar about the picture, as if he had seen it at some other time and place. He thought, "Leona resembles her," yet when he looked at Leona there seemed to be only a slight resemblance. She had the same coloring, and somewhat similar features, but so did Rose Barlow and unnumbered other brunettes.

"I know," Leona murmured, "I suffer by contrast."

"Your mother?" Tennant asked.

She nodded, and Jules Huffmeyer, who had followed them from the kitchen, said braggingly:

"Mr. Bell brought a famous artist all the way from Kansas City to paint that picture."

Leona motioned them to the lounge and seated herself in a chair so that she was directly facing Tennant.

"Why did you pick the fight with Bravo?" she asked with imperious assurance.

Tennant considered the question, and the reason it was asked. She had shown no displeasure immediately after the fight, nor during supper. In fact she had seemed to take a secret satisfaction in it when she introduced him to Fred Eggleston and "Tex" Taylor, the two men he hadn't known, referring to him as the "toughest ramrod in Arizona Territory." Yet now she demanded an explanation.

"Mebbeso that knockdown did Bravo good," Huffmeyer suggested.

"I didn't ask you," Leona said sharply, and waited for Tennant's answer.

The thought came to Tennant that there was a fiercely possessive instinct in this girl. It showed in her voice when she spoke of the Bar Bell; it had been there, too, when he had told Jules Huffmeyer that he would do no riding until his ribs were properly knitted. She had, he guessed, taken possession of Huffmeyer's loyalty and transformed it into obedience. He wondered if she was expecting to reshape her new ramrod to the same pattern and by the same process, first gaining his loyalty, then using it as club to force obedience.

"Am I supposed to explain my actions every time I do something around here?" Tennant asked.

Swift resentment brightened Leona's eyes and deepened the color of her cheeks. Tennant watched its warming effect. He looked at the picture again and understood why it had seemed familiar. Leona closely resembled her mother now.

"Is there any good reason why you shouldn't tell me?" she demanded.

"None at all," Tennant admitted. He glanced at Huffmeyer, and caught an expression of puzzlement in the old man's faded eyes. Then he said to Leona, "My reason for hitting Bravo was pretty obvious. You know why I did it, but you want to hear me offer an excuse. Well, I'm not in the habit of giving excuses for what I do."

For a dozen seconds, while Huffmeyer sat straight as a buggy whip and watched with hushed expectancy, these two strong-willed people eyed each other in unwavering appraisal—until Leona shrugged and said:

"No, I guess you don't." She smiled thinly, and added, "Perhaps that's one of the reasons why I wanted to hire you."

The clatter of Shakespeare Smith's dishwashing came from the kitchen. Presently the plaintive twang of a banjo drifted across from the bunkhouse. Tennant put his fingers to shaping a cigarette.

"What are you planning to do about those steers on Tonto Flats?" he inquired casually.

"I want them rounded up and driven to the Rio Pago. I'd like to see them pushed right into Usher's front yard."

"And supposin' the TU starts shootin' while it's bein' done?" Jules asked.

"We'll shoot back at them, and shoot

to kill," Leona declared. "Every TU rider knocked out of saddle is one less we'll have to fight!"

IX

JEFF TENNANT marveled at this girl's seeming eagerness to plunge her crew into a shooting war. He wondered if she had ever seen a rider knocked from saddle by a bullet, or heard a wounded man moan out his agony, or seen broncs drift home at dawn with blood-smeared saddles.

"I happen to know that Usher is in no shape to hire more gunslingers," she said. "He's going to be real short of cash until he delivers those steers to the Indian Agency. I wish there was some way to drive them so far Usher couldn't gather them in time to fill his contract next January. That would save my winter feed and put Usher over a barrel to boot. In fact it would break him, but I don't suppose it's possible."

"With a little luck," Tennant said, "anything is possible."

He got up and selected a chunk from the stacked wood beside the fireplace and put it across the andirons.

"It'd take luck a-plenty to hide three or four hundred steers where the TU couldn't find 'em," Huffmeyer muttered.

"I know a place they'd be lost for months," Tennant said, "if we could figure a way to get one night's head start."

"One night?" Leona asked. "Only one night's start?"

Tennant nodded. "Usher probably won't bother us much while we round up and cut out the Bar Bell stuff. It's my guess he'll wait for us to drive his steers past Menafee Camp before he makes a move. That way he can claim he was within his legal rights and didn't jump us until we trespassed on his range."

"More'n likely," Huffmeyer agreed. "He's slicker'n cow slobbers."

"Well," Tennant said, "suppose instead of driving those steers toward the Rio Pago, we hustle them across Bar Bell range to the Slot. If we could get them halfway to Spanish Pass before Usher knew what we were up to, nothing could stop us. There's no way a horse can climb the divide except by the Slot trail. Once Usher's steers are strung out and climbing, a rearguard of two men could hold off an army."

Leona had been frowningly attentive. Now she smiled and eyed Tennant with frank admiration.

"If the steers were pushed through Spanish Pass and down the other side, they'd scatter in that Crazy Canyon country!" she said excitedly. "It would take Usher's crew a couple of months to gather them again."

Even Jules Huffmeyer seemed impressed, for he said, "By that time there'd be ten-foot drifts in Spanish Pass."

"Yeah," Tennant said. "I met Hobo Bill Wimple today and he says we're going to have an early winter."

Leona got up and smacked the palm of her left hand with a tight-clenched fist.

"Jeff, you've hit it!" she exclaimed. She paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. "We've got to figure a way to do it," she insisted. "We've got to!"

"A decoy herd might do it," Tennant suggested. "Drive Bar Bell stuff toward the Rio Pago while the TU steers start west. If we did it at night Usher'd have no way of knowing the Bar Bell herd was a decoy."

Leona clapped her hands. "That will do it!" she cried happily. "And it will break Tate Usher!"

"It's not foolproof," Tennant cautioned. "But it's worth a try." He turned to Huffmeyer and asked, "How long will it take to gather a *remuda?*"

"There's upwards of twenty broncs in the horse trap right now," Jules reported. "All broke and ready to work. Tex Taylor could haze 'em into the corral before breakfast."

"Then I see no reason why we shouldn't get started tomorrow morning," Tennant said. "It's going to take a lot of riding to chouse those steers out of the brush." He glanced at Leona. "I'll need your cook, which means you and Jules will have to rustle your own grub for a spell."

Without waiting for acceptance of this decision, Tennant went to the kitchen.

"How are you fixed for supplies, Shakespeare?" he inquired.

"We possess an abundance of plain but nourishing food," the cook assured with a theatrical flourish of his hands. "I would hesitate to call this kitchen a cornucopia due to a slight deficiency of fresh fruit, but otherwise it is a veritable horn of plenty."

Tennant grinned. "Good," he said, and went on to the doorway. "You'll be taking the chuckwagon to Tonto Flats in the morning. . . ."

SHERIFF Sam Lambert was playing cribbage with Doc Medwick when Johnny Peebles stepped into the jail office.

"I got more bad news, Sheriff," he announced.

"What now?" Lambert asked disgustedly and threw down his cards. "Somebody been shot?"

Johnny nodded.

"Who?" Lambert demanded.

"Red Naviska. He was shot in the back and killed."

"Who done it?" Lambert asked, almost shouting in his excitement.

"Jeff Tennant," Johnny said. He cuffed trail dust from his shirt and glanced at the dim-lit corridor which led to the cells. "I didn't exactly see it happen, though."

"Then how do you know Jeff did it?" Doc Medwick inquired.

"Well, I was rimmin' around near Petty's place this afternoon. I heard three shots and saw Tennant whirl away from a window and ride off, fast as he could travel. Then I went to the shack and found Red layin' face down on the floor. He was dead."

Lambert scowled at Doc Medwick.

"So Tennant is just a tough talkin' galoot, eh?" he exclaimed accusingly. "He's been back three days and two men are killed. By the eternal, I wouldn't be surprised if it was him that killed Ed Peebles!"

Doc Medwick shrugged as he got up.

"I suppose we've got to go out there tonight," he said wearily. "This coroner job is getting to be a tedious chore." Then he asked Johnny, "Are you sure it was Tennant you saw?"

"Positive," Johnny insisted. "I got a good look at his face."

"Then why in thunderation didn't you take a shot at him?" Lambert asked.

"I didn't know what had happened, till I looked into the shack. Then it was too late."

Lambert took his hat from the wall peg.

"Usher has lost two men in three days' time," he muttered. "Tate'll be downright pestilential about this."

"You want to ride with me in the buggy?" Doc Medwick asked.

"Might as well. No tellin' where Tennant is by now. He might be camped somewhere near his burnt-out shack, but I ain't relishin' the chore of lookin' for him at night. You know what, Doc —I think them years at Yuma turned him loco. I think he's gone kill-crazy!"

"Might be," Doc admitted. But even so he didn't mention the fact that Tennant could probably be found at the Bar Bell.

"You stay in town, son," Lambert said to Johnny, "I'll want a signed statement from you in the mornin'."

"Yes sir," Johnny agreed, and loosed a secret sigh as he left and walked to the Palace Saloon. He ordered a drink.

"What you sweating about?" Sid Stromberg asked.

Instead of answering, Johnny stared at Stromberg's swollen nose and bandaged hand.

"Who did that to you, Sid?"

"None of your cussed business," Stromberg said crankily.

There wasn't anyone else in the saloon and presently Stromberg said:

"Don't dawdle all night with that drink. I'm closing up."

"You sure ain't very sociable," Johnny complained.

He downed the whisky, ordered another, and grimaced when he drank it. He had never taken two drinks in such rapid succession. He wondered if they would make him drunk, and hoped they would.

"Is that all?" Stromberg asked impatiently.

Johnny nodded and went out to the stoop.

Except for the livery's high-hung lantern and a bloom of lamplight at the hotel doorway, Main Street was dark. A cold breeze came out of the north, bringing a smell of winter. Johnny shivered, watched Doc's rig leave the livery, and wondered if Jeff Tennant's gun used the same size bullets as his. Those forty-five caliber slugs sure messed a man up at close range. Johnny shivered at the thought of it.

Idaho had said not to worry about it. But a man couldn't help thinking, especially when he was alone. Maybe if he had somebody to talk to it would be different.

Stromberg barred the saloon door from the inside and put out the lamps. Johnny felt more alone than ever, standing on the dark stoop. He walked slowly down a side street to Sashay Alley and followed it to Mayme Shay's house. When he opened the front door a bell jangled somewhere back in the house and a blond girl in a blue silk kimona came downstairs.

"Hello, handsome," she said smilingly. . . .

A THIN mantle of frost silvered the ground when Jeff Tennant helped Tex Taylor and Fred Eggleston haze twenty broncs out of the Bar Bell yard. There was a brief mixup at the front gate, sharp Rebel yells and a flurry of fast riding to turn a trio of bunch-quitters. Then, as the saddle band settled into an orderly procession along the road, Tennant jogged back to the chuckwagon where Bravo Shafter and Jack Ramsay were loading tarp-covered bedrolls.

Dismounting beside Bravo, Tennant asked, "How far east will we find TU steers?"

Shafter had maintained a sullen silence at the breakfast table and seemed reluctant to talk now. He heaved the last bedroll up to Ramsay, not glancing at Tennant.

"Ain't seen none east of Smoke Arroyo," he said finally. "The graze sort of peters out down that way."

Tennant stood silent for a moment, considering the tone of Shafter's voice, not quite sure that it was civil. According to Leona, who stood now in the kitchen doorway with Jules Huffmeyer, Bravo was the best all-around man on the crew, and Tennant disliked the idea of firing him. The Bar Bell was short handed as it was, yet Bravo might well become a trouble-maker.

"Smoke Arroyo," Tennant repeated, recalling the location of that landmark and its surroundings.

Then he went over to the barn where Shakespeare Smith was untangling a snarled harness.

"Here," the cook proclaimed dismally," is irrefutable proof that careless haste makes shameful waste."

"There's no rush, just so you get to Soldier Spring in time to cook supper," Tennant told him, and stepped aside as Pete Lunsford came up leading four mules.

It was a full hour after daylight, yet it was cold enough so that the mules'

breath made smoky puffs and Lunsford had turned up the collar of his mackinaw. When Tennant walked to his ground-hitched horse he peered thoughtfully at the massed clouds above Dragoon Divide and remembered Hobo Bill's prediction. The early snow part of it, he guessed, was going to be fulfilled. There was a plain smell of winter in the air this sunless morning.

Shafter and Ramsay were already mounted. Tennant stepped into saddle and waited until Lunsford joined them.

"Let's ride," he said.

They were passing the house when Leona ran out and handed old Pete a blue bottle of pills.

"I think you forgot them on purpose," she said censuringly.

Then she turned to Tennant, smiling up at him.

"Good luck, Jeff," she said.

Her voice was soft, almost intimate. There was a hint of emotion in it, and in the warm brightness of her eyes. She was, Tennant reflected, a complex and thoroughly unpredictable girl.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, and was wondering about the look in her eyes when he led the crew out of the yard.

Presently, as he overtook the remuda, Tennant fell in beside Shafter.

"Shakespeare will make camp at Soldier Spring," he said. "We'll use the flats there for a holding ground until we've worked the east end clean of cattle."

"Good idea," Bravo said civilly. He dug a Durham sack from inside his mackinaw and offered it to Tennant. "Smoke?"

Tennant nodded, showing no sign of the satisfaction that rose swiftly in him. Until this moment there had been some doubt in his mind about the wisdom of keeping Bravo on the pay roll. One resentful rider could spoil the unity of a crew, and unity was the prime essential in time of trouble. But there was no doubt now.

Jack Ramsay dropped back beside Tennant.

"You reckon Usher's bunch will give us any trouble while we're makin' our gather?" he asked.

"No," Tennant said, liking the friendly tone of this lanky rider's voice. "Don't believe they'll bother us for the first few days."

Pete Lunsford grunted agreement. "Not until we git up into the Tailholts," he prophesied. "Then it'll be Katey bar the door."

Tennant hadn't revealed his full plan to the crew and saw no reason to do so now. They believed the impending drive of TU steers was to be toward the Rio Pago, which was the logical destination, and so they would make no unintentional slips if TU riders engaged them in conversation.

SUNLIGHT broke through a rift in the overcast, gilding the steepled crests of Twin Sombreros and slanting across the weather carved castles of Dragoon Divide.

"El Sol," Lunsford drawled and turned down his collar. "An old man's best friend."

They came to the Bar Bell fork in the road and the crew was about to follow the remuda cross country when Tennant heard the hoof-pound of a running horse. He halted at once, and during the brief interval of waiting, wondered who the oncoming rider might be. Someone from town, and in a big hurry.

The idea that it might be Ben Petty occurred to Tennant, but he thought, "That jigger wouldn't break jail if they left the door wide open."

"It sounds like bad news traveling fast," Bravo suggested.

Then Joe Barlow galloped up on a sweat-stained livery horse.

"Jeff—they're comin' after you!" he announced excitedly.

"Who?" Tennant asked, eyeing Barlow sharply and wondering if he was

drunk this early in the morning.

"The whole TU bunch is in town and Sheriff Sam has sworn 'em in as deputies. You was seen at Petty's cabin yesterday afternoon."

That didn't make sense to Tennant. "What of it?" he asked.

Joe nudged back his battered Stetson. His glance shifted to the three Bar Bell riders behind Tennant.

"You want them to hear it?"

Tennant nodded.

"Well," Joe said, "Red Naviska was killed at Petty's place—shot three times in the back. They brung his body in late last night. He was wearin' Ben's shirt and pants."

"So," Tennant said softly.

He thought about this in frowning silence for a moment, knowing why Naviska had gone to Petty's cabin for clothes, and guessing how he had happened to get shot. Someone had mistaken Red for Ben.

"Who saw me at Petty's shack?" he asked.

"Johnny Peebles. He says he was lookin' in a window just after he heard some shots. He says you killed Naviska."

"The kid shot Red by mistake, and I'm to be the goat!" Tennant thought instantly.

This, he understood, was another slick trick like the brand-blotting, and the burning of Ed Peebles' body. It was a way to frame him into jail, or force him to leave the country. A few moments ago he had been free to ride as he chose; now, by the simple process of hearing Barlow's warning, he was a fugitive from justice. Without firing a shot he had acquired the hideout rôle so willingly relinquished by Ben Petty.

"Did you hear Lambert say anything about me being at the Bar Bell?" he asked.

"Nope," Barlow said. "Sam seemed to think you'd be camped at the Roman Four, where I was headin' to."

Tennant grinned. "Thanks for getting the word to me so fast," he said.

"Wasn't no bother," Joe said. "Anythin' else I can give you a hand with, Jeff?"

Tennant shook his head. "Reckon you'd better ride north of the road on your way back to town, so you won't run into the posse."

Then, noticing that Barlow's horse had left plain tracks in the road's deep dust, another idea came to Tennant. Sheriff Lambert would be sure to see that sign and wonder who had preceded him. The old lawman might detail a rider to follow Joe's tracks back to town. But if Joe rode east now with the crew and there was a set of tracks continuing north—

"I wish you'd go along with these boys for a ways, Joe," Tennant said, "so you won't leave a trail for the posse to follow."

"Suits me fine," Joe agreed, and eased his horse over to where Pete Lunsford waited. "Long time no see, Pete. You ain't been to town for a month or more."

"Been feelin' poorly," Lunsford reported. "Mebbe I'm gittin' old."

Tennant peered eastward, watching for sign of travel. The dust was too damp to raise much of a banner this morning. He turned to Bravo.

"You take charge of the work while I do a little posse dodging," he said. "Lambert may not know I went to work for the Bar Bell. It'll make things simpler all around if no one tells him."

"Sure," Shafter agreed. "We ain't even seen you."

"We'll tell old Shakespeare to keep your vittles warm in case you should need some supper after dark tonight, Jack Ramsay drawled.

THEY rode off then, Barlow with them, and Tennant heard Bravo say:

"Naviska was always looking for gun trouble. I'm pleasured he found it with Jeff instead of me."

A cynical smile quirked Tennant's lips as he put his horse over the place where the crew had crossed. Six riders and twenty loose broncs had come down the Bar Bell road. If Lambert took time to sort the tracks he would discover that the same number had gone on through the brush.

Tennant lifted his horse into a lope. No telling how soon the posse would be coming along, and there were a couple of chores that needed doing.

When he came to Menafee Camp he hurriedly unsaddled the Bar Bell horse he was riding and turned it loose. There were two horses in the corral. He roped a gray, and then, discovering that it had been badly gored, saddled a short-coupled grulla.

When he angled into the brush ten minutes later, Tennant hazed the gray ahead of him for upwards of a mile.

It was well after noon when he approached Usher's headquarters ranch—a square log house surrounded by shacks, sheds and corrals. A single tendril of smoke rose from a stovepipe atop the long, low-roofed cook shack. Except for that, and several ponies in the corral, there was no sign of life.

"Nobody home but the cook," Tennant thought, and turned in saddle to peer at his backtrail.

The sun, which had alternately shone and hidden behind shifting cloud banks was out now, but there was no warmth in it. And no sign of travel on the flats, nor on the near slopes of the Tailholts.

The posse, Tennant reckoned, was too far back to interrupt this play, in which case his plan should be foolproof. The grulla bronc he was riding wore Usher's brand, and the cook wouldn't be expecting Jeff Tennant to pay a visit here.

X

RIDING into the yard, Tennant noticed numerous small skeletons among the scatteration of tin cans and rubbish. At first he guessed the bleached bones were those of coyotes, but when he saw others between the house and corrals it occurred to him that coyotes wouldn't make targets of themselves by coming into the yard.

"Must be dogs," Tennant decided, and presently, as he neared the cookshack, was greeted by barking, penned-up dogs.

He saw an assortment ranging from suckling pups to full-grown dogs of various breeds. Why, he wondered, would Tate Usher keep so many dogs? And why were they penned?

A bald-headed oldster wearing a flour sack apron stood in the doorway.

"Howdy stranger," he called. "Light down and rest your saddle."

"Gracias," Tennant said, and dismounted. Nodding at the dog pens, he asked, "Why all the canines?"

"Cleek uses 'em for target practise," the cook explained, and seemed genuinely pleased to have company. "Idaho turns a few loose at a time and shoots at 'em afoot and horseback, so's to keep his hand in. Won't let nobody else shoot 'em—not even Usher."

"So," Tennant murmured, understanding how Cleek maintained his speed and accuracy with a gun. "Does he hold target practise often?"

"Almost every day, except when he runs short of males, like now. It's sure a sight to see him work on them dogs. He'll come out of his office and mebbe be talkin' to somebody, or saddlin' his horse, when a dog trots past. Then he'll draw so danged fast you can't see it, and slam two-three slugs into that dog."

The cook glanced at the grulla's brand. "You hired out with Usher?" he inquired.

Tennant nodded. "Last night, in town."

"They call me Baldy Walsh," the cook announced expectantly.

But Tennant ignored this invitation to tell his name.

"Cleek and the others are helping the

sheriff look for a galoot they say needs hanging," he explained. "I'm supposed to load a pack-horse with provisions for them, so they won't have to waste time coming in for grub and ammunition." He added casually, "Cleek said you'd know which horse to pack."

"Sure," Baldy agreed. "That jug-headed old bay with the blazed face and black points. You'll find a pack-saddle hangin' in the wagon shed."

Tennant took down his catch rope and walked over to the corral. This, he reflected, was going even better than he had hoped. Bachelor camp cooks were cranky and unsociable as a rule, but Baldy seemed eager to cooperate, for he crossed the yard and unlocked the door of a building which Tennant guessed was the commissary.

The bay was easy to catch. Tennant led him from the corral and purposely left the gate open. If the cook didn't notice this there would be no fresh mounts awaiting Usher's crew. Tennant cinched up the pack-saddle and went over to the commissary stoop where canned goods, bacon, flour, coffee and boxed cartridges awaited him.

"Better give me a skillet or two," Tennant suggested. "Also a few potatoes, so we won't get scurvy."

It was a matter of minutes then until the provisions were securely packed aboard the bay and Tennant gave Baldy a farewell salute.

"He'll hate me for this as long as he lives," Tennant thought, and regretted the necessity of tricking so cheerful a man.

But bounteous provisions removed the need of calling at the Bar Bell or the roundup camp for food. A man could hide indefinitely this way. He could choose his camping places and change them often enough to confuse a posse.

That had been Tennant's plan, but now a new strategy came to him. Cleek, he supposed, would put the Bar Bell and the roundup camp and the road to town under strict surveillance, believing them logical traps to lure a hungry fugitive. But when Usher's ramrod learned about this raid on the TU's commissary he might change his tactics.

"Once Cleek knows I'm supplied with food he'll pull his whole crew into the hills to hunt my hideout," Tennant thought.

He considered this new angle, liking it more and more. If Cleek quit watching the roundup camp there would be a chance to give the Bar Bell's crew a hand with the gather, and to keep in touch with town.

A gray barricade of clouds converging from the north and west had blotted out the sun when Tennant reached the Rio Pago. Glancing back at the TU he saw the cook rush toward the corral as horses galloped across the yard. Thoroughly satisfied, Tennant rode into shallow water and splashed westward for a mile before leaving the river. . . .

IDAHO CLEEK and Tate Usher reached Menafee Camp at two o'clock. They had followed a single set of hoofprints and now, as Cleek read sign, he said:

"Somebody changed horses, and turned the others loose."

"Who would do that?" Usher demanded. "It couldn't be Tennant, because we followed these tracks all the way from town."

"Is there any reason why Tennant couldn't of spent the night in town?" Cleek asked sarcastically.

"No, there ain't," Usher admitted. He peered about the clearing as if fearful of attack. "You think it's Tennant we're trailing, Idaho?"

Cleek nodded. He followed the tracks into the brush and presently, noticing how far back Usher lagged, he called:

"No need to be afraid of jumping him around here. This sign is a couple hours old."

"Don't be so cussed sharp with your

tongue," Usher complained. "I don't like it."

Cleek loosed a derisive cackle. "Maybe you'd like to fire me," he suggested, "on account of my tongue being so sharp."

Impotent rage flared in Usher's pouched eyes. "Why do you always get so blasted mean when there's trouble?" he muttered. "You're like a lobo smellin' raw meat."

Later, the trail turned toward the TU.

"It's Tennant," Cleek said, "and I got a hunch what the smart alecky son is up to."

"What?" Usher asked, puzzled.

But Cleek ignored the question.

It was almost dark when they rode into the ranch yard and listened to Baldy's report of a visitor.

"Didn't give his name. Just said he'd been sent to get provisions so's—"

"Why you old halfwit!" Usher exclaimed. "You've grubstaked Jeff Tennant!" He shook his fist at Baldy and bellowed: "You're fired!"

"Leave him be," Cleek ordered, "unless you want to do the cooking around here."

Usher tromped off toward the corral.

"Fix us up a bait of grub, Baldy," Cleek said, "while we saddle fresh horses."

"Sure," the cook agreed, and turned toward the stove. Then he said dejectedly, "There ain't no fresh horses. Tennant left the corral gate open and they all run off."

Cleek cursed. His right hand slid to holster and his eyes took on the squint Baldy had seen so many times when Idaho shot at dogs. But Cleek didn't draw, and so the cook put his trembling hands to preparing supper. . . .

Ten miles northwest of the TU Jeff Tennant was also preparing supper. A cold wind came off the Dragoons. It whipped up swirls of dust in the arroyo where Tennant had camped, and it brought a plain smell of moisture.

"Raining up on the rim right now," Tennant reflected. "Or maybe snowing."

Either rain or snow would make this posse-dodging deal a dismal proposition. But now the fine smell of sizzling bacon combined with coffee coming to a boil whetted his appetite. He flipped a skillet of fried potatoes with practiced ease and his flame-lit face held a cheerful grin as he thought, "This meal is on Tate Usher."

After eating his fill, Tennant busied himself gathering firewood.

"Going to be a long cold night," he predicted. "And maybe a wet one."

When he had a good supply of mesquite gathered, Tennant climbed part way up the rocky arroyo with a gunny sack of provisions and made a cache by dropping it between two huge boulders and covering it with stones. Then, backing down the bank, he brushed out his boot tracks with a mesquite branch.

Making plans for the morrow, Tennant chose a place for another cache in Bent Elbow Canyon near the foot of the Slot trail. After that he would turn the pack-horse loose and head for the Bar Bell if the sign was right.

Hunkered close to the small fire, Tennant listened to the methodical munching of his hobbled horses, browsing nearby. This, he reflected, was the way it had been during the Lincoln County War—lonely campfires and dismal dawns. He wondered about Jane's reaction to the charge that he had killed Red Naviska. Would she believe Kid Peebles' story of cold-blooded murder?

Joe Barlow had seemed to believe it. So had the Bar Bell crew. It wouldn't make any difference to them, nor to Leona, who had said the fight could be won by using the underhanded tricks Usher used.

But killing would make a difference to Jane, if she believed Peebles' story. There was no doubt in Tennant's mind on that score. Jane would overlook impulsive violence in a man, and could bal-

ance his bitterness against what she called becoming a hired gunslinger. But she would never countenance killing, nor associate with a man she thought was capable of it.

"She'd shrink every time I came near her," Tennant muttered, and the certainty of it was like a cold wind blowing.

* * * * *

AT SEVEN o'clock Dude Finn dismounted on a low hill directly north of the Bar Bell yard and stamped his feet to get the chill out of them. He had replaced Goldie Rimbaugh here at six, with orders to remain until relieved at midnight.

"Not a sign of Tennant," Rimbaugh had reported. "Just old Jules and the girl, near as I can make out."

Now, instead of riding circle around the Bar Bell, Dude walked, leading his horse. A man could get tolerable cold riding slow, especially when he was in sight of cheerful, lamplit windows.

"Cussed hard way to earn a livin'," Dude muttered.

As he trudged around the big yard, Dude got to thinking how he would like to be spending the night in town. It would be nice and warm in the hotel dining room, with Rose Barlow smiling at him as she served supper. Just thinking about Rose warmed Dude's blood. She was a teaser if ever he had seen one.

Dude was on the kitchen side of the house now, near enough to catch a glimpse of Leona Bell when she passed a window. There, he thought, was another girl who could keep a man warm on a chilly night. She looked a lot like Rose Barlow, only she had more class to her—more style and uppity pride. But underneath she was no different than Rose, or any other girl.

He made another circle of the yard, and presently, when wind-driven rain came slanting out of the north, Dude cursed himself for failing to tie a slicker behind his saddle. Again he came to the kitchen side of the house. But instead of standing at a distance, he moved in until the building partially shielded him from wind and rain.

Standing close to the wall he peered through the window and watched Leona tote dishes from table to sink. She wore a red blouse, and a skirt that fitted snugly across her trim hips.

"She even walks proud," Dude thought.

He built a cigarette, taking care to cup his hands so the match flare wouldn't show. He smoked the cigarette down and watched the window, wanting another glimpse of Leona. He remembered a schoolteacher in Texas who'd seemed so uppity she would scream if a man so much as laid a hand on her, and recalled how willingly she had let him kiss her. Maybe this Leona girl was the same way, Dude reflected, and tantalized himself imagining how it would be to have her in his arms.

He tied his horse to a stoop post and was turning toward the window when Leona opened the kitchen door. "What do you want?" she asked.

The abruptness of it startled Dude Finn. He guessed she must have seen his cigarette.

"Why, I was wanting to get out of the rain, ma'am," he said. "It's tol'able wet and cold out here."

"Then you'd better come into the kitchen," she invited. "I suppose you're watching for Jeff Tennant."

Dude nodded, so surprised by her invitation that he was momentarily speechless. He followed her into the kitchen and took up a position in front of the stove, holding his palms to its welcome warmth and watching Leona pour a cup of coffee.

"Have you had supper?" she asked. When he nodded she said, "Here's a cup of coffee to thaw you out," and placed it on the table.

Remembering his manners, Dude took off his hat.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said.

This, he told himself, was like that time in Texas when he had called on the schoolteacher. Only it was better, for that one hadn't been half so good looking. Covertly watching Leona as she washed dishes, Dude decided she was the prettiest girl he had ever known. And the classiest.

"What makes you think Jeff Tennant would come here?" Leona inquired.

Dude grinned and said apologetically, "It ain't my idea, ma'am. Idaho Cleek seems to figger Tennant will git hungry and either come here or to the roundup camp for vittles. Idaho has got men watching both places, also them homesteaders east of the Pot Holes and the road to town. In fact there's guards everywhere, except at the TU."

"Then that's probably where Tennant will go to eat," Leona suggested. She smiled at Finn and asked slyly, "Do you think Jeff Tennant would take a job if I offered him one?"

Dude shook his head. "Your dad helped send him to jail. They say Tennant came back to square up with everybody who was on the jury that convicted him. He half killed Sid Stromberg with his fists, and tried to talk Usher into a shoot-out. He's got a loco streak in him, ma'am. Look how he killed Red Naviska—not givin' Red a chance."

"Then," Leona said thoughtfully, "perhaps it's a good thing you are here. I'd hate to have Tennant take out his spite on me."

DUDE nodded agreement, hugely pleased that this girl considered him as a protector even though there was bad feeling between the Bar Bell and the TU. It might make it easier to get around her pride.

He gulped down the last of his coffee and joined her at the sink.

"Let me wipe 'em for you, ma'am," he said.

Leona smiled. "That's real nice of you," she said softly and handed him a towel in such manner that their hands made brief contact.

She met his gaze directly, seeing a swift rise of boldness to his eyes. A knowing smile creased his nearly handsome, cleft-chinned face and all his masculine vanity was in that smile.

Jules Huffmeyer came in from the living room. He stared at Finn.

"What the devil you doin' here?" he exclaimed.

"He's helping me with the dishes," Leona explained, "and he may help me in another way, later on."

"Such as what?" Huffmeyer demanded, thoroughly baffled.

Leona looked at Finn, forcing an intimacy into the smile she showed him before shifting her gaze to Huffmeyer.

"Dude may decide to be on the winning side. He may let us know the exact time Usher plans to jump my crew when we drive those TU steers toward the Rio Pago."

"But I thought—" Huffmeyer began impulsively, then shook his head. "It—well, I reckon mebbe you're right," he finished lamely and turned back into the living room.

Finn eyed Leona wonderingly. "You reckon there's a chance of the Bar Bell winnin' out against the TU?"

"Of course we'll win," Leona assured him. "I've arranged to hire more men, in Tucson and El Paso." Then she lifted a hand quickly to her mouth and exclaimed, "I shouldn't have told you that, Dude. I forgot you're still on Usher's pay roll."

The use of his first name stirred a further boldness in Finn. He put down the towel and took Leona by the shoulders.

"I'll be on your pay roll too, if you like, honey," he said eagerly. "And it won't take much to pay me."

He took his kiss then, ignoring the pressure of her resisting hands.

XI

FOR two days and nights, while snow silvered the high Dragoons, Jeff Tennant played a crafty game of hide and seek with the TU posse. Making no effort to break through toward town, he drew Usher's riders deep into the roughs around Bent Elbow Canyon and made life miserable for them.

By day he circled until he cut fresh tracks, then followed a pair of riders who were also tracking him—hour after hour. At night he built false campfires, remaining only long enough to get one well started before riding off to build another. And on two successive nights he interrupted the posse's supper by crashing through brush near their campfire and attracting them to futile pursuit.

Then, with a cold rain drenching the Tailholt Hills on the third day, Tennant changed his tactics. Deliberately allowing himself to be seen, he started up the Slot trail so late in the afternoon that it was dark by the time he reached the first switchback turn. Here he halted, and listened for sound of pursuit, and heard none.

"Afraid of ambush," he thought. "They'll guard the Slot and wait for daylight."

Water rushing down the deep-grooved trail was already washing out his tracks. He wondered if the posse would ride up to Hobo Bill's camp on the rim tomorrow, and hoped they would.

He angled along the boulder-strewn slope for another mile, then made a cautious descent and rode toward the Bar Bell. This, he reflected, marked the end of his fun. Usher's bunch might scout the rim, or even take a look-see into the Crazy Canyon country, believing him to be there.

That meant two or three days of grace at the most. And because snow was already falling in Spanish Pass, the roundup had to be completed within a week, or the drifts might be too deep for travel across the divide.

He was endeavoring to calculate the time it would take to finish the gather, when he rode into the Bar Bell yard. Leona came to the kitchen door at once, calling:

"Come have a cup of coffee," and adding a name that sounded like Dude.

Tennant wondered about that. "It'll take more than coffee," he said, and grinned as Leona exclaimed, "Jeff—I didn't recognize you!"

When he had cleaned a plate that had been piled high with warmed-up beef and potatoes, and Huffmeyer had gone to bed, Tennant asked:

"How's the roundup coming?"

"They moved camp yesterday," Leona reported. "They're working the north flats."

"Making better time than I expected," Tennant said, and rolled a cigarette. "I didn't figure five riders could clean out the east end in so short a time."

Leona smiled. "The crew has grown since you left. Joe Barlow and young Billy are on the payroll." When Tennant frowned she asked, "What's the matter, Jeff?"

"I promised Joe's wife I wouldn't let him side me."

"But he's not," Leona insisted. "He's simply working for wages and I'm paying them. Not you." Then she said, "I've got more news. Ben Petty is out of jail. Not only that, but he left Bunchgrass Basin and took Rose Barlow with him."

That news astonished Tennant. "How?" he asked. "How'd Ben get out of jail?"

"A way you'd never guess," she told him. "A way so slick that only Tate Usher would think of it."

Tennant waited, aware now that she

was purposely toying with his curiosity. A mischievous smile dimpled her cheeks. That, and the curve of her half-parted lips reminded him of Rose Barlow.

"Give up?" she asked.

Tennant nodded.

"Well, it seems that Usher visited Ben and offered to put up a thousand dollars bail if Ben would leave the country. I suppose Ben was half-crazy with being penned in a cell, and afraid a jury might convict him. Anyway, Usher put up the bail and Ben caught the next stage east—with the Barlow girl. Who do you suppose told me all this?"

Tennant shrugged, not caring. "So Usher gets Petty's homestead for one thousand dollars and spoils my ace in the hole," he said. "The ace that would've proved he framed me three years ago."

But that didn't seem to impress Leona at all.

"You'd never guess who told me, Jeff," she said again.

TENNANT grinned, and shook his head. Leona, he thought, was in high spirits tonight. There was a glow to her eyes and a plain note of triumphant satisfaction in her voice when she said:

"Dude Finn gave me the news, and he'll be giving me more, from time to time. Important news!"

She told him then about Dude's first visit and how the TU rider had snapped at her bait.

"The plan came to me the moment I saw him out there," she said. "He thinks he's irresistible to women."

"So you made him sure of it by letting him kiss you," Tennant said.

Leona blushed. "I didn't have much choice in the matter," she admitted. "Jules doesn't like my scheme at all. He thinks I'm acting like a brazen hussy."

"Aren't you?" Tennant asked.

She resented that, and showed it in the arrogant tone of her voice.

"I'm doing what I think necessary to save this ranch. If being brazen will help us win I'll be brazen." Presently she added, "I come by it honestly, Jeff. I'm Tate Usher's daughter."

Tennant stared at her. "You're what?" he demanded.

Leona smiled, as if enjoying his astonishment.

"I found it out the night Daddy Bell died," she said. "He was delirious, and he kept pleading with Tate Usher not to tell about me, not to let anyone know I was Usher's daughter. Afterward, when I took over the ranch records I found several entries in a cash book marked loans to Tate Usher. They totaled eighteen thousand dollars, Jeff, which explains why the TU got bigger while the Bar Bell went downhill."

Tennant considered her startling revelation in shocked silence for a long moment.

"So that's why you said no one else had so much reason as you for hating Tate Usher," he said then, slowly.

"Yes," Leona agreed, "and it's why I want to see TU shrunk back to a shirttail outfit. If being brazen will help do it I'll be as brazen as one of Mayme Shay's girls." Then, with a frankness that pleased Tennant, she added, "Dude's kisses aren't much of a price to pay, Jeff. In fact I rather like them."

Tennant chuckled. Here was a girl false enough to lure a man into becoming a spy, yet honest enough to admit she enjoyed his kisses. Considering this, Tennant understood that Dude Finn's brash courting was a new thing to Leona; that compared with Clark Morgan's disciplined correctness, Dude's bull boldness would have a certain appeal.

"So Finn is now a spy, along with being a ladies' man," Tennant reflected, shaping up a cigarette.

"Speaking of ladies' men," Leona said, "reminds me I've got more news for you, Jeff. Clark is courting Jane

Medwick again."

The wheatstraw paper broke between Tennant's fingers. He peered at Leona while flakes of tobacco sifted to the floor. "How do you know that?" he asked.

"Doc came out to check on Jules yesterday. We got to talking about you, and I said it looked as if you'd left the country. Doc said he hoped you had, now that Clark was keeping company with Jane again."

Tennant discarded the torn cigarette. He rubbed a thumb along his whisker-bristled chin and muttered:

"So she thinks I shot Naviska in the back."

"Sure," Leona said. "So does everyone else."

"Do you?" Tennant asked.

Leona nodded. "Doc should be able to tell whether a man was shot in the back or not. But it makes no difference to me, one way or the other."

A mirthless smile twisted Tennant's lips. Leona thought he was questioning the fact Red was shot in the back, not who had shot him. There was no doubt in her mind about his having shot Naviska, nor was there in anyone else's mind. He stood convicted without trial, even by Jane. That was the part he couldn't comprehend—that Jane, who had always had faith in him, would believe it. And that she would quit him without hearing his side.

"I guess you had quite a case on Jane," Leona sympathized. She crossed the kitchen and brought a bottle and glass from the cupboard. "Drown your sorrow with a jolt of Colonel's Monogram, Jeff," she suggested.

Tennant took the generous portion at a gulp.

"*Gracias*," he said.

When she filled the glass again he gazed at the amber whisky in silence for a brief interval, seeking a way to excuse Jane's lack of faith, wanting to save the precious image she had made for him. But he couldn't contrive it, nor hold back the resentment that came, wave on wave, to wash the image away.

HE DOWNED the second drink in moody silence. Leona refilled the glass, took a sip herself, and handed it to him with a self-mocking smile.

"We're a couple of renegades," she said cheerfully. "Let's be happy renegades."

Tennant grinned, emptied the glass, and got up.

"Guess I'll head for the bunkhouse. Haven't had much sleep lately."

Leona walked to the door with him. When he opened it she placed a hand on his arm and said softly:

"Jane wasn't your kind of woman, Jeff."

It occurred to Tennant now that Leona had lost Clark Morgan.

"Was Morgan your kind of man?" he asked.

"I guess not," Leona said. Her hands came up to his shoulders and she whispered, "I guess you're my kind, Jeff."

And there was a smile on her half-parted lips when Tennant kissed her.

In saddle before daylight, Tennant reached the roundup came in time to joint the Bar Bell's crew at breakfast.

"We been expectin' you every night," Bravo Shafter announced smilingly. "We knowed you'd give them galoots the dodge sooner or later."

Tennant poured himself some coffee. "It took a little time," he admitted, and glanced at Joe Barlow. "So you're back in the cow business again, Joe."

"Yeah, and I'm stayin' in it, Jeff. That town life don't agree with me at all."

Joe looked more like his old self, Tennant thought. He looked proud, and so did young Billy who said:

"Town life is for wimmin-folk."

Tennant wondered what Effie Barlow thought about this deal. The poor woman probably felt deserted, with

Rose and her menfolk gone. The thought came to Tennant that he should send Joe and Billy back to her, that even though he hadn't hired them, he was morally responsible for their remaining here. But something he saw in Joe Barlow's eyes kept Tennant from interfering. Joe didn't look like a boozy old loafer now. He looked like a man.

When the crew saddled up, Tennant asked:

"How many more days to get the job done, Bravo?"

"Seven or eight," Shafter predicted.

Tennant peered across the scattered bedrolls to where the herd was being held by a slow-circling rider. It was full daylight now, the air raw with night's dampness and with the wind-toted chill of snowclad mountains.

"I figure five more days is all we can spare," Tennant announced. "Then we drive what we've got gathered."

Shafter shrugged. "You're the boss," he agreed.

Presently Tennant led his seven-man crew out for the day's circle.

"I may have to leave you boys on short notice," he said, "so I'd better tell you how this deal is to be handled. We finish the roundup Friday, and camp at Big Meadow. Friday night we drive the Bar Bell stuff toward the TU—"

"Ain't you got your rope twisted?" Pete Lunsford asked.

Tennant shook his head. "That's our decoy herd," he explained. "While three or four men are driving it slow and easy, the rest of us will be pushing Usher's steers up the Slot, through the pass and over into the Crazy Canyon country."

For a long moment, as the men considered this news, they rode in silence.

"Why, that's a peach of a scheme, Jeff —a jimdandy!" Joe Barlow exclaimed.

"Usher wouldn't have a chance to bring back them steers in time to fill his reservation contract!" Shafter said.

"That's the way I figure it," Tennant agreed. "But we've got to make our drive through the pass before snow gets drifted too deep."

"We'll do her," Billy Barlow declared. "Ain't nothin' can stop us, by grab!"

And so it seemed. For even though a drenching rain set in before noon, the day's gather was a good one. So good in fact that Tennant decided to move camp a day ahead of schedule. After supper he saddled a fresh horse.

"I've got to make a trip to town," he said, and rode off at a mud-splashing lope.

Leona, he believed, had told the truth about Jane. But he had to hear Jane's explanation for quitting without giving him a chance to clear himself. Even if she didn't believe what he was going to tell her, she owed him the chance to tell it.

BEN PETTY'S departure, he understood bitterly, had ruined all hope of proving that Usher had rigged the brand-blotting deal. There would be no trial now, no chance to use those boot prints as evidence. By leaving Bunchgrass Basin, Petty had as good as admitted himself guilty of Ed Peebles' killing.

"And the spooky fool has spoiled my chance to prove Usher framed me," Tennant muttered.

As he neared Quadrille, Tennant recalled the romantic interlude he had shared with Leona last night. Her eager embrace and her talk about him being her kind of man had surprised and pleased him. But now he dismissed it for what he considered it to be—merely a brief and meaningless display of pent-up emotions.

Leona had lived a lonely life. She liked attention, and wasn't particular who furnished it. If Dude Finn had happened by the Bar Bell last night Leona would probably have welcomed him as warmly.

There was, he reflected, plenty of reason for her being as she was. She had inherited Tate Usher's lack of principle and his selfishness. Even as Usher would use any trick to ruin the Bar Bell, Leona would do the same to save it. Romance had been secondary to Tate, despite his hot-blooded ways.

It was the same with Leona. No man would ever come ahead of the Bar Bell. The ranch was what she lived for, that and her hatred of the man who was her father.

It was still raining when Tennant tied his horse to the picket fence in front of Doc Medwick's house. The lamplit windows sent out a cheerful glow, and the tinkling notes of a piano reminded Tennant of the many evenings he had spent in the parlor, listening to the soft, sweet music Jane loved to play. He wondered about Doc, and hoped the medico was playing poker with his cronies at the Palace.

A familiar eagerness prodded Tennant as he knocked on the front door. Anticipation, and a sudden warming sense of confidence came to him while he waited. Jane had believed him that other time, in spite of the jury's decision. She would believe him now. All he had to do was tell her the truth. It seemed as simple as that to him now, and he was grinning cheerfully when Jane opened the door.

"Jeff!" she exclaimed.

Tennant took off his rain-soaked hat. He stepped inside and closed the door.

"Glad to see me, honey?" he asked.

Then he saw Clark Morgan standing in the parlor doorway. For the first time in his life Jeff Tennant was jealous. Really, rampantly jealous. The swift burst of it was like a flame inside of him.

Jane took his hat and said, "Take off your slicker, Jeff," and stood waiting for it.

But Tennant ignored her. He looked at Morgan.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I was about to ask you the same question," Morgan said in his precise, orderly voice. "I thought you were dodging a posse back in the hills."

"Your mistake," Tennant muttered. He stepped away from the door. "And your time to leave."

Morgan's glance shifted to Jane. "Would you prefer that I leave?" he asked.

Tennant gave Jane no chance to answer that. Stepping close to Morgan he said challengingly, "Let's decide that with our fists, Morgan."

"I don't choose to fight in this house," the merchant declined with the patience of a thoroughly disciplined man—a patience that hugely aggravated Jeff Tennant.

"Maybe this will change your mind," Tennant said, and slapped Morgan's face.

"Why, Jeff!" Jane objected indignantly.

But Clark Morgan possessed an established composure that nothing seemed to shake.

"Not in this house," he said again.

He took his hat and coat from the halltree.

"Good night, Jane," he said, and went outside, closing the door gently behind him.

"Yellow," Tennant reflected.

But he understood that Morgan had outplayed him here and that the merchant's ironclad control had made his undisciplined display seem like cheap bravado.

JANE said nothing. She watched him as she might watch a stranger, not knowing what he would do next.

"Sorry I lost my temper," Tennant apologized, "but I'm not sorry Morgan left."

"Aren't you afraid the posse will find you here?" Jane asked coolly.

Tennant shook his head. "Is Lambert in town?" he asked.

"He was this morning," Jane said.

She watched him go to the door and peer out, and leave it slightly ajar when he turned back to her.

"I haven't much time," he said, "but I want you to know I didn't shoot Naviska—in the back or otherwise."

Jane met his unwavering gaze with eyes equally unwavering.

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Jeff?" she asked.

A slow grin creased Tennant's whisker-shagged cheeks.

"I might, some time," he said. "But I never have. Naviska was shot by mistake. I think Johnny Peebles mistook Red for Ben Petty. But however it happened, I didn't do it."

Then, as hoofs sounded in the street, Tennant turned quickly to the doorway, his right hand hovering close to holster. Watching him, Jane saw how much he had changed in the past few days. He had a wary way, an alertness and a vigilance, as if this were a game he thoroughly understood. And thoroughly enjoyed. That was the part she couldn't comprehend—that he should take pleasure in so grisly a game.

A galloping horse splashed along the dark, rain-drenched road. When the muffled beat of its passage across the bridge came back, Tennant said: "Someone in a hurry." He stood in thoughtful silence for a moment, wondering who that rider might be.

"It's Morgan," he said then, "going to tell Usher where I am."

The idea of Morgan riding into the hills on a night like this amused him. The merchant was in for a considerable wetting before he found the posse. Tennant smiled.

"You wouldn't marry an informer, would you, honey?" he asked.

Jane shrugged. "I don't blame Clark for resenting your actions, Jeff," she said. "I resent them, too." Then she asked, "Do you know that Joe Barlow and his boy are with the Bar Bell roundup crew?" When he nodded, she asked, "Do you think that's right, after what you promised Effie?"

"So she's been complaining," Tennant muttered. "Well, I didn't hire them, Jane. But in my opinion Joe is better off riding roundup than guzzling booze at Stromberg's bar. And young Billy is doing what he's wanted to do for a long, long time."

"Suppose they get shot?" she asked. "Will that be better for them, also?"

XII

IT WAS the same thing all over again. Tennant frowned. Jane disliked violence so thoroughly that she considered no price too great to pay for peace.

"It's a chance Joe and Billy have to take," he explained, "unless they want to spend their lives tied to Effie's apron strings. A man can't always play it safe and secure. Even Morgan is risking his neck hightailing up that slippery road tonight."

But this didn't convince Jane at all. Tennant could tell by the way she looked at him, with her eyes so coolly calculating. He had never seen that expression in her eyes. It wasn't like Jane to be calculating. Nor aloof. Even on the few occasions when she had been angry at him, she had never been like this.

"You believe me, about Naviska?" he asked.

Jane nodded. "But that doesn't change the rest of it, Jeff. It doesn't change the fact that you're willing to risk Joe Barlow's life and young Billy's to win yourself a bunch of cows."

The unfairness of that roused swift resentment in Tennant.

"I'm not fighting just for a bunch of cattle," he said impatiently. "There's more to it than that."

"Revenge?" Jane asked, and con-

trived to make the question an accusation as well. Then her voice turned soft and warm and almost pleading. "Won't anything stop you, Jeff—before it's too late?"

Tennant was considering that, and taking hope from it, when he heard footsteps in the yard. Going quickly to the door he saw Doc Medwick, and understood that this visit was almost over.

He went quickly to Jane and took her by the elbows.

"A quick kiss before I go?" he asked.

Jane shook her head. "No quick kisses, Jeff. That's all there'd ever be, the way you're going. That, and waiting to learn if you're dead or alive. It's no use, Jeff. I'm through waiting."

Doc Medwick came in. He said sternly, "Unless you need medical attention go out and get on your horse."

Tennant ignored Doc. "You sure about it, Jane?" he asked.

"Of course she's sure!" Medwick exclaimed. "You've had your chance and you've chosen the gunsmoke game. Why should any sensible girl wait for a posse-dodging renegade to get caught—or killed?"

The measured ticking of the hall clock's polished pendulum sounded loud to Jeff Tennant. *Tick, tock,* while he looked at the only girl he had ever wanted for a wife. *Tick, tock,* while he waited for his answer, and read it in the appraising coolness of her eyes. *Tick, tock.*

"Get out," Doc ordered.

There was no anger in his voice. Just impatience, and a little disgust. The tone of voice one would use on a grubline rider who had overstayed his welcome.

A mocking smile quirked Tennant's lips. This was the way a man lost a beautiful girl. With a clock ticking and an old man telling him to get out. No chance to fight for her with fists, or with a gun.

He took his hat from Jane. "I could wish you luck with Morgan," he said, "but I'd be lying."

Then he strode outside, slamming the door behind him. . . .

Bravo Shafter couldn't understand it. Each day the gather increased and the roundup was ahead of schedule, yet Jeff Tennant's morose mood continued. He seldom spoke, except to give an order. Even when Leona visited camp on the third day and talked to Jeff he didn't seem to say much.

Billy Barlow noticed it too.

"You reckon Jeff has a stomachache, or somethin'?" he asked his father.

But if Tennant was sick he didn't reveal it in his actions. First to saddle up in the morning he was last to fill his plate at Shakespeare Smith's supper fire, and he rode the slippery hills with a reckless speed that made old Pete Lunsford remark:

"A ridge runnin' rannihan. Puts me in mind of my younger days in Texas."

On Thursday afternoon Tennant took a tally of the herd. And because this was the first time the overcast had lifted, he also took a long look at the Divide's white mantle. There was snow down to the Slot. Even if it wasn't deep it would make for treacherous footing and slow progress up the steep trail.

This was at Big Meadow. The last circles were being made, with small bunches of cattle drifting in from the roundabout hills as riders choused them through brush and pine timber.

"Hi-ya, cattle! Hi-ya, hi-ya!"

Weary men riding weary horses, cursing the bunch-quitter steers, cursing the mud that spattered their bearded faces.

"Git along, cattle—git along!"

THE cutting was started while riders were still out on circle. Slow, tedious, temper-ragging work that churned the meadow into a hock-deep sludge of mud and manure where pivoting ponies went

down and swearing men kicked free of stirrups.

Within an hour one horse was so badly gored it had to be shot, and soon after that young Billy Barlow limped up to the wagon with a horn-slashed leg for Shakespeare Smith to bandage. But the work went on, TU steers to the west side of the meadow, Bar Bell stuff to the east. Hour after hour of it, while Jack Ramsay brought in eleven head and Bravo Shafter showed up just before dark with six more.

"Had nine to start with," Bravo admitted wearily, "but three of 'em turned back on me." He added, "Saw a rider headin' towards the Bar Bell. Looked like Dude Finn."

Tennant thought about that for a moment, slumped in saddle. If Shafter had seen Finn it must mean the posse had returned, and Dude might be making a report of Usher's plans to Leona.

"Take over till I get back, Bravo," he said. "Eat supper soon as the cut is finished, and start the two herds moving. You, the Barlows and Fred Eggleston handle the TU steers. I'll catch up with the other boys, and we'll try to join you some time before daylight. But no matter what happens, push those steers through the Pass."

Not waiting for Shafter's acceptance of this, Tennant turned his pony toward the Bar Bell. Bravo, he thought, might question his being sent with the steers instead of the Bar Bell herd, which was where the fighting would be—if there was a fight. But Tennant wanted him to ramrod the drive up the Slot trail. That was the important part of this deal, the part that meant survival or ruin for the Bar Bell. And for himself.

It was dark when Tennant topped the first ridge west of the roundup camp. Cow smell came off the meadow, strongly pungent in this damp air.

Smith's supper fire made a meager shine against the dark and there was no cheer in the sight of it; no sense of warmth or fellowship for Jeff Tennant. It occurred to him now that there had been none of that since the night Jane had refused to wait for him.

He had known then that he had lost her. But there had been a flimsy strand of hope in him until Leona visited camp and reported that a wedding day had been set.

"Jane is wearing Clark's diamond," she told him. "They're to be married on the fifteenth, and Doc is bragging that it'll be the biggest wedding ever put on in Bunchgrass Basin."

"And the best, to Doc's way of thinking," Tennant thought dejectedly.

There had never been a time when the old medico had wanted him for a son-in-law. Doc was a town man and wanted his daughter to marry a man who would live in town. A peaceable, prominent citizen who could give Jane the comforts and security she was accustomed to having.

"That's what Jane wants also," Tennant muttered.

A three-quarter moon was shining through wind-raveled clouds when he rode into the Bar Bell yard. There was a saddled horse tied to the back stoop. He passed close enough to see its TU brand, and thought, "Bravo was right!"

Leona, he supposed, would be entertaining Dude in the kitchen while Jules Huffmeyer remained in the parlor, for there were lamps going in both rooms. He tied his horse to the corral fence and was walking across the moonlit yard when he heard Leona cry: "No, Dude—no!"

The sheer surprise of it held him motionless for a moment, and in this brief interval Leona screamed.

Tennant rushed to the kitchen door. He flung it open, saw Leona struggling with Finn and glimpsed Jules Huffmeyer sprawled near the parlor doorway with blood on his forehead.

"Jeff!" Leona cried, and that single word repulsed Dude Finn at once, so

that she was free of his embrace.

Finn drew as he whirled, and fired one frantic, half-aimed shot before Tennant's gun exploded. Then Dude's gun slipped from his fingers and both hands clutched spasmodically at his chest. He took three queerly graceful steps backward. Then he bent at the middle, as if taking a bow, and fell so abruptly that his face thudded against the floor.

WHILE Leona doctored Huffmeyer whom Finn had pistol-whipped, Tennant toted Dude's body outside and coaxed the TU bronc to stand while he tied the limp shape to saddle, face-down. Handling the body made Tennant sick. He gagged, and cursed himself for this squeamishness. He had shot two men during the Lincoln County War, hadn't he? It wasn't as if this was his first gunfight. But those other shootings had been during an impersonal battle between strangers. This seemed worse, somehow. Even though he had fired in self-defense it seemed worse.

Tennant turned the horse loose and hazed it from the yard. Usher would accuse him of this killing as a matter of course, and Jane would soon hear the news. If there had been any last doubt in her mind about marrying Morgan, this would clinch it, he supposed. She might even wonder if he had lied to her about Red Naviska.

When Tennant returned to the stoop Leona stood there waiting for him. She wore a coat cape-fashion around her shoulders but it didn't conceal the torn bodice of her dress.

"You killed him to save me, didn't you, Jeff?" she said softly, and smiled.

It seemed odd that a girl should smile at a time like this, that she should seem pleased and wholly self-contained so soon after seeing a man killed. A man whose kisses she had enjoyed.

"No," Tennant muttered. "I killed him to save myself— Did Finn know when Usher plans to jump the herd?"

"Yes, but Dude wanted to—to be paid, before he told me."

Tennant laughed cynically. "So all your scheming got you was a torn dress."

Leona wasn't smiling now. She was peering at him with wide, startled eyes. "But I did it for both of us, Jeff."

"Us?"

Leona reached out and grasped his arms.

"Of course," she said, and smiled again. "You're going to share the Bar Bell with me, aren't you?"

Until this moment it hadn't occurred to Jeff Tennant that she would marry him. Even though she had called him her kind of man he had considered that their brief emotional interlude had been sparked by mutual disappointment, and by more whisky than he was used to drinking. Certainly there had been no mention of love, nor matrimonial intent. Even now, with the knowledge that she was offering him a full partnership, he thought, "She's lost Morgan and wants me as second best."

Her fingers tightened so that their nails bit into his arms.

"Aren't you, Jeff?" she insisted.

And her eyes, so warmly glowing, told him that she was offering more than half of the Bar Bell.

Tennant took time to place an accurate reckoning on his future, knowing how forlorn a place the Roman Four would be without Jane to share it. Here was a woman wanting a mate; wanting a partner too. If they won the fight against Usher, the Bar Bell would be bigger than ever—a vast cattle kingdom. And he had nothing to lose in such an alliance, except what tattered remnants of pride Jane had left him.

Yet, for a reason he couldn't understand, Tennant said finally:

"Our bargain was one hundred heifers and five bulls. I see no need for

changing it."

Leona's hands dropped instantly. She stepped back and stared at him.

"You mean—you don't want me?" she demanded.

Tennant shrugged. "There's only one girl I ever really wanted. Nothing will change that."

"Not even her marriage to Clark Morgan?" Leona asked, incredulous.

"Nothing will change my wanting her," Tennant said.

When he turned toward his horse Leona said throatily, "Curse you, Jeff! Curse you!"

She remained on the stoop as he rode past, and because she was thoroughly angry her lamplit face held a graphic, passionate beauty. She was the living image of a desirable woman now. She roused a rash urge in Jeff Tennant, an itching impulse to turn back and take her in his arms. But he didn't.

GOLDIE RIMBAUGH rode into Menafee Camp shortly after eight o'clock.

"They cut the herd this afternoon," he said to Cleek, "and they're driving a bunch this way."

"How far back?" Cleek asked, picking at his gold teeth with a match stick.

"Five-six miles. It was dark when they lined out right after supper. But I seen Jeff Tennant workin' the cuts this afternoon."

"So that's where he's been while we was freezing up there on the Divide!" Usher exclaimed, eyeing Cleek accusingly. "I told you he'd throw in with the Bar Bell first chance he got."

"He's a smart one, that Tennant," Lee Pardee said. "I remember a foxy trick he turned whilst ridin' in that Murphy-Chisum ruckus. He was—"

"Forget that," Cleek interrupted, irritated. "I'm sick of hearing how blasted smart that jigger is." He turned to Rimbaugh and asked, "Where's Dude?"

"Can't figger it out," Rimbaugh said. "Dude told me to wait while he made a circle south of Big Meadow. He never came back."

"You hear any shots?" Cleek asked.

Rimbaugh shook his head. "When Dude didn't show back I thought mebbe he went on into town for a drink. Dude likes his likker."

"Also his wimmin," Lee Pardee offered with a chuckle. "If you opened up Dude's head all you'd find would be a woman."

Kid Peebles stood in the doorway with an oil-soaked rag and a revolver in his hands.

"Dude," he suggested, "might be at Mayme Shay's place right now, havin' hisself a time."

"I'll fire that proddy bum, traipsin' off when we need him," Usher threatened.

A horse sloshed through mud puddles nearby.

"Look what's coming!" Cleek said sharply.

"That's Dude's horse!" Rimbaugh exclaimed.

"And Dude's body on it," Cleek predicted.

The pony came on, stepping high through the yard's deep mud.

Kid Peebles cursed, staring at the limp head and mud-spattered hands that dangled loosely.

The pony stopped at the corral gate. Idaho Cleek walked over, grasped Dude's hair, and tilted up the face for a brief look.

"Is it Dude?" Usher called.

"Who'd you think it was—General Grant?" Cleek snapped. Then he peered at the doorway group and called impatiently, "Come on, come on. Cut the corpse loose and tote it into the shack."

Rimbaugh and Pardee went about the chore with plain reluctance.

"We play it legal much longer and we'll need a new crew," Usher said angrily, when Cleek came up.

"Play it any other way and you won't

need a crew," Cleek retorted. "We've got Lambert with us, haven't we? How long would you've lasted in this country if the sheriff had been against you?"

Usher sighed. "I know, I know. But we ain't gittin' what we're after, Idaho. We ain't no nearer takin' over the Bar Bell than we was a year ago."

"Oh, yes we are," Cleek corrected. "We've got Petty's place, haven't we? Once we run Tennant off we'll have his, which means we control the Tailholt Hills and Tonto Flats. I don't cotton to the idea of fighting a woman-bossed outfit but we'll get it, in time."

"We got to get Tennant first!" Usher exclaimed. "If he's thrown in with Leona it'll take some doin'!"

Cleek smiled. He rolled a cigarette and watched Finn's body being carried into the cabin. Kid Peebles also watched. He had never liked Dude, but the way Dude's head wabbled with the mouth wide open made Johnny feel bad.

"I wonder who'll be next," he said sickishly.

"What'll we do about that drive, Idaho?" Usher asked.

"Bust it," Cleek said. "Bust it good and proper."

"How about Lambert? What'll he think about that?"

"You heard Goldie say Tennant is working with the Bar Bell crew, didn't you?" Cleek asked impatiently. "That makes the Bar Bell an outlaw outfit."

Usher peered thoughtfully at his dark-faced foreman. "Sure," he agreed. "Sure it does."

"And we're all sworn in as deputies, to take Tennant—dead or alive," Cleek said, as if explaining an intricate problem to a child.

Usher smacked his chap-clad leg. "Then we can bust 'em legal!" he exclaimed.

Cleek smiled thinly, and glanced at the cloud-mottled sky. "If it don't storm for a couple hours we'll have good targets, Tate. They'll be targets that nobody could miss."

They walked to the corral to saddle up.

"We'll be outnumbered a trifle, Idaho," Usher said worriedly.

"Not after the first couple minutes, we won't be," Cleek promised. "We're going to make them first shots count, and I don't want anybody firing till I give the word."

As they rode from the yard, Cleek looked at the sky again.

"I hope the moonlight lasts one more hour," he said.

XIII

BOTH herds had left Big Meadow when Tennant rode up to the chuck-wagon where Shakespeare Smith crouched close to a glowing bed of embers.

"The north herd started out right after supper," Smith reported grouchily. "Shafter got moving about an hour ago. He said I'm supposed to be at Bent Elbow and have breakfast ready at sunup. Is that official?"

Tennant nodded.

The old cook slumped closer to the fire, holding his bearded face in both hands.

"It's ghastly," he complained. "Fifteen years on the stage entertaining multitudes of ardent admirers—ten years of culinary triumph cooking in cow camps, and my reward is an all-night drive in shivering solitude." He lifted tragic eyes to consider shifting cloudbanks. "A big storm brewing, which means I'll probably be wheeling through a blizzard by the time I reach Bent Elbow."

Tennant rode on, feeling a kindred moroseness and not wanting to share it. There was a storm brewing, all right. Two storms, in fact, and one of them might break before midnight.

The moon shone intermittently, its periods of illumination less frequent as

Tennant splashed along the road which had been churned into a quagmire by the herd's recent passage. A stronger wind came out of the north, raw and damp with a smell of snow in it.

Pine timber made a windbreak here and a sort of barrier on both sides of the road. Lunsford, Ramsay and Taylor should have had little trouble driving cattle through this, Tennant thought, and they had been told to take it easy.

When he overtook Pete Lunsford dawdling along behind the slow-plodding drags, the old man asked:

"Find out anything at the ranch?"

Tennant shook his head and rode on.

"I found out how it feels to kill at close range," he thought. He had learned also how unpredictable his reactions could be. Recalling the contrasting emotions Leona had aroused in him, Tennant felt a nagging sense of bewilderment. A man could never be sure of himself around a woman. He could reject her with half his mind and want her with the other half.

He rode alongside Jack Ramsay.

"How they acting?" he asked.

"Just like they'd been drove all their life," Ramsay bragged. "How far you reckon we'll git before the TU tackles us?"

"Quien sabe?" Tennant said, and made the shrugging gesture which is part of this Spanish declaration of doubt. "We're on Usher's range right now. He might let us get beyond Menafee Camp, or he might jump us in the next ten minutes."

It occurred to him that there were three or four likely places for ambush. Making a mental tally of the trail's crooked course through the hills he wondered which of those places Usher would choose. The cut bank pass on the ridge near Menafee Camp, perhaps; or the timber-fringed gully beyond it. Then he remembered Nugget Wash. That, too, would be a natural trap. And it wasn't far off.

"Don't forget how the plan goes, Jack," he said. "Soon as the shooting starts we drop back and make a slow fight. The longer it lasts the better. Only thing we're trying to win is time."

He rode ahead then, intending to guard against cattle turning down Nugget Wash instead of crossing it.

"Keep your eyes peeled," Ramsay advised. "I got a hunch that wash might be the place."

The moon was half hidden by clouds now, so that the herd was little more than a blur of moving shadows. Tennant passed the leaders and glimpsed Tex Taylor moving up through the trees across the trail. Tex, he supposed, was wondering about Nugget Wash also. It was directly ahead, not more than a hundred yards away. Even in this poor light the sandy bottom made a wide chalky strip between the dark banks above it.

Tennant scanned those brush-fringed banks, the sense of impending attack so strong now that he expected to see movement up there. But he detected no sign of ambush as he rode into the wash and turned his horse down it far enough to allow the herd to cross without interference.

The leaders came on, sniffed at the wet sand and plodded methodically across it. When three cows turned up the wash Taylor yelled, "Hi-ya—hi-ya!" and quickly sent them back into the herd.

"Go on, cattle—go on," Tennant chanted again and again, slapping his saddle with a rope end.

MOST of the herd was across and moving up the steep trail beyond. Lunsford urged the last stragglers into the wash. "This isn't the place," Tennant thought.

Tension left him. It would take another hour to reach the cut bank pass; perhaps longer. And as he had told

his companions, time was all they had to win.

He took out his Durham sack and began shaping a cigarette with cold-numbed fingers. Jack Ramsay was helping old Pete with the drags, cursing the cattle in a singsong voice.

Tennant lit the cigarette and at this exact instant heard Idaho Cleek call sharply from the high bank:

"Grab your gun, Tennant!"

That challenge astonished Tennant. He had anticipated gunfire without warning, had expected that the shrill whine of a bullet would signal attack. But even so, with surprise hurtling through him, Tennant had his horse in motion when guns began to blast above him.

As the first bullet whanged past Tennant's face he thought fleetingly, "Cleek had me lined in his sights," and wondered why the TU foreman had taken the trouble to challenge him.

Tennant drew his gun and was firing at the bright beacons of muzzle flare above him when a bullet burned into his left thigh. He pressed the wound instinctively with his rein hand and cursed the splinters of pain that spiraled up his leg. Then a slug gouged a hank of hide from his horse's flank. The animal squealed, bogged its head, and crossed the wash in a wild tantrum of bucking.

They were into timber when Tennant got the horse under control. There was a lull in the firing now.

"Back here, Tex—back here!" Tennant heard Pete Lunsford yell.

Another burst of shooting, then Tex Taylor's shrill, high-pitched scream came from up the wash.

Tennant thought, "He's shot!" and winced as Taylor screamed again.

The moonlight faded out completely. Tennant heard cattle stampede back across the wash as he eased his horse through the timber. He wondered about Tex. There had been no more yelling, and no more shooting. Windblown rain spattered against his face. When he turned into the road his horse lunged sideward abruptly, narrowly missing collision with a cow brute that went splashing past.

"Pete—where are you?" Tennant called.

"Over here," Lunsford said.

Tennant couldn't see him, but the tone of the old man's voice made him suspicious at once.

"You hurt?" he asked.

"Some," Lunsford admitted. "Right arm is no good."

Tennant rode up beside Lunsford who made a vague, saddle-slumped shape in the rainswept darkness.

"I'll fix you a tourniquet," he said and cut a saddle string for that purpose.

"Tex is gone," the old man muttered. "He stayed out there in the wash instead of droppin' back like he was supposed to."

"Maybe he's just wounded," Tennant said. "I'll go take a look soon as I fix your arm."

When he tied the tourniquet, Pete said, "Usher sure played it smart, lettin' us all git into the wash before the shootin' started."

"Yeah," Tennant agreed, "but I can't figure out why Cleek yelled at me like he did."

"Mebbe he can't kill a man cold turkey," Lunsford suggested.

That explanation had occurred to Tennant but he had rejected it as ridiculous. Cleek, he believed, was as cold-blooded as a man could be. It wasn't reasonable that so accomplished a killer would adhere to a code of fair play. Yet what possible purpose could have motivated Cleek's warning?

The tramp of a nearby horse brought Tennant instantly alert. He had his gun drawn when Jack Ramsay rode up and announced:

"Tex is dead."

"You sure?" Tennant asked.

"Yeah. He got shot off his horse. I seen him and was goin' out to help, but a bunch of cattle tromped Tex all to pieces."

Ramsay gagged. "Never saw such a awful sight," he said whimperingly.

Tennant shivered, and noticed that the rain had turned to snow.

"What do we do now?" Lunsford asked.

Tennant didn't answer for a long moment. He forced his thinking away from Tex Taylor. He listened to the wind prowling through timber, and wondered if Usher's men had left their perch. He squinted his eyes against the increasing flurry of snow flakes, half-expecting to see riders loom against the yonder darkness.

"Jack will ride to the ranch with you, Pete," he finally said. "Then he'll go get Doc Medwick to fix your arm."

"How about you?" Ramsay asked.

"I'll watch here for a spell," Tennant said. "If the TU doesn't show up I'll go give the boys a hand with the steers."

"We goin' to leave Tex's body there all night?" Ramsay asked.

"Nothing else we can do," Tennant muttered.

THEY sat in silence for a moment. Then Ramsay muttered, "Cuss it all to perdition!" and rode off with Pete Lunsford.

Tennant took out his knife, intending to cut a saddle string for a tourniquet, but the knife slipped from his cold-clumsy fingers. He cursed and dismounted into puddled mud that was fetlock deep. He tried to light a match but the wind and snow frustrated three attempts, so he blindly explored the muck without success.

Climbing back into saddle, he wondered if the wound was still bleeding, and guessed it was. But the pain had dulled to an ache that sheathed his leg from knee to hip.

A hard gust of wind set up a high wail in the pines. It reminded him of Tex Taylor's scream. He waited and listened, sure that Usher's bunch had left their perch. If they didn't show soon he would know they had called it a night. In which case the decoy herd had served its purpose, for those TU steers should be well up the Slot trail by midmorning.

Tennant shrugged deeper into his mackinaw collar and waited out another ten minutes while his horse kept turning its rump to the wind. Then, as he was on the point of leaving, Tennant caught the wind-borne rumor of nearby voices.

Not waiting for a target, Tennant fired. He gigged his horse across the road and back, firing at swift intervals to give the impression that two or three riders were in action. When his gun was empty he eased into the timber and reloaded while TU riders opened up with a round of random firing.

Presently, as the shooting ceased, Tennant fired a single shot and trotted his horse deeper into the pines, smiling a little at the outburst of firing behind him. If Usher's bunch kept this up there would be little chance of them bothering the steer herd tonight. And tomorrow would be too late.

For a time, as he rode a slow circle through the snow-pelted darkness, Tennant considered the changes this night's work might bring to Bunchgrass Basin. Usher would be ruined financially by failure to fill his Indian Agency contract. A bankrupt ranch couldn't pay gun wages, which meant the end of his hardcase crew.

"Just a matter of time," Tennant thought and, considering all this, briefly forgot the throbbing ache in his thigh.

With the TU shrunk to a one-man outfit, the Bar Bell would be the big spread, and the Roman Four the second in size. There would be a chance for men like Joe Barlow to run cattle

in the Tailholts again. Ben Petty might come back to stand trial and then Usher could be exposed as the scoundrel who had framed a homesteader into Yuma Prison.

But because Jane was marrying Clark Morgan on the fifteenth, Tennant savored the satisfaction of tonight's success without sense of jubilation. The Roman Four, without Jane to share it, would be a sorry place, no matter how big an outfit it became.

Tennant halted his horse behind a windfall and waited for sound of pursuit. Usher, he guessed, was out for blood tonight. His blood.

"That's why Tate is making his crew buck this storm," Tennant mused, and took satisfaction in that knowledge.

Hearing no sound of riders, Tennant quartered toward Big Meadow. The wind whined shrilly through the treetops. When he crossed a clearing he noticed that snowflakes were pelting the right side of his face.

"It's getting worse," he thought, and wondered how Bravo Shafter was making out with the steer herd.

The wind had been coming out of the north, but it seemed to be shifting. He skirted Big Meadow and headed westward, and now the wind was full in his face.

Within one hour's time his horse was lunging through frequent drifts and Tennant realized that Shakespeare Smith might not be able to reach Bent Elbow with the wagon. That would mean there would be no hot coffee for cold, saddle-beat riders tomorrow morning; no sizzling, Dutch-oven breakfast to renew their ebbing vitality. But it wouldn't be the first time men had been forced to drive cattle on empty stomachs.

When Tennant came to the abandoned chuckwagon stalled in a hub-deep drift he wasn't surprised. But later when he met three snow-draped steers drifting eastward he thought urgently, "Bravo is having trouble."

A nagging sense of apprehension caused him to urge his horse to a faster gait. The wind came in thrusting gusts that blinded him for minutes at a time, and his tired horse invariably swerved southward during these wild squalls of snow-shrouded blankness.

JEFF TENNANT used the wind-driven snow as a compass to keep him on course. When it pelted his right cheek he understood that his horse had drifted to a southwesterly direction and forced the animal to the right until snow came squarely against his face.

"Bravo is needing help right now," he thought, and spurred his tired horse into a floundering gallop. Then, during a brief lull in the wind, he saw more steers—a whole bunch of ghostly gray shapes plodding methodically through the snow's slanting curtain.

Tennant knew then that he had lost. And knew why. A shift in the wind had defeated him. The steers had balked at facing the storm and Shafter had failed to hold them, once they turned tail to it.

Tennant cursed, and rode on, meeting more steers. The herd, he supposed, had fanned out across a wide area. But they would all head east, and the Bar Bell riders would go south. Leona would have the news by daylight. He grimaced, thinking how forlorn a failure this would be for her. And he knew there was only one way now to beat Tate Usher—the way he had originally planned to do it. Man to man.

Yet even so, sensing the bleak futility of further riding, Tennant had to be sure, had to know positively that the crew had quit. He thought, "They might've held part of the herd," and clung to that fragile strand of hope as he rode westward.

At first daylight, with the windswept whiteness of Bent Elbow Canyon ahead of him, Jeff Tennant knew. There

was not a steer, nor a rider in sight.

It was easier, riding with the wind. Even though Tennant's horse was too leg-weary for anything faster than a plodding walk, the trip back seemed faster. Perhaps it was because there was no hurry now; no need beyond the need for sleep and a bandage and a long drink of whisky.

"I'll get drunk," he thought, and was eager to reach Quadrille.

But when he came to Ben Petty's place he put his horse in the lean-to and built a fire in the cabin. The stove's heat melted snow that had sifted in beneath the door, and the warmth made Tennant so drowsy that he could scarcely keep awake long enough to wash and bandage his leg. The puckered wound was raw and inflamed; the flesh around it discolored.

"Needs Doc Medwick's attention," Tennant muttered.

By the looks of his pant leg the wound had bled a pint or more. That, he supposed, was the reason he felt so washed out. And so sleepy.

He wondered if Medwick was at the Bar Bell, or had returned to town. Doc might have stayed at the ranch all night, because of the storm. As coroner he would have to take a look at what was left of Tex Taylor. And if any of Usher's crew had been hit in last night's shooting, the old medico might be at the TU.

Tennant eased back on the bunk to think about this, and was asleep almost instantly. . . .

It had been a long night for Leona Bell. A tedious night. Fearful that Jules' skull might be fractured she had ridden to town for Doc Medwick. One hour after their return to the Bar Bell Pete Lunsford had ridden in with a bullet-smashed arm and the news of Tex Taylor's death. Then Bravo Shafter had brought his frost-bitten crew home to tell her how completely the storm had ruined the steer drive.

"We couldn't hold 'em," he muttered dully. "We just couldn't hold 'em."

The crew had ridden out at daylight in search of Shakespeare Smith, and Doc Medwick had gone to bed. But there was no sleeping for Leona, no escape from the constant, sickening realization that her fight against Tate Usher had failed.

"Curse him!" she sobbed, and finished off a cup of black coffee spiked with whisky, her third since breakfast.

A howling wind blew sleety snow against the kitchen's west window. That wind, she thought bitterly, would drive all those TU steers back to Tonto Flats. There would be no chance of saving her winter graze, now. No chance to save anything.

Methodically, with the need for motion prodding her, Leona cleared the table of dirty dishes. Where, she wondered, was Jeff Tennant? It occurred to her that he might have been killed, but that possibility scarcely registered against the thrusting fear that she would lose the Bar Bell, that she couldn't prevent the ruin Clark Morgan had predicted.

SHE was washing dishes at the sink when she saw Idaho Cleek ride across the snow-swept yard. He peered at the bunkhouse, keeping a wary watch on its door as he rode around toward the kitchen stoop.

Leona dried her hands on a dish towel. This, she knew instinctively, was an emergency call for Doc Medwick, but she thought with a rising excitement, "He might be like Dude Finn," and hastily arranged her hair.

When the knock came at the door she called, "Come in," and leaned indolently against the sink, shoulders back and hands on hips.

Cleek stepped inside, not removing his hat.

"Johnny Peebles is bad hurt," he said. "Is Doc Medwick here?"

Leona nodded. "Doc was up most of the night. He's sleeping."

"Somebody get hurt?" Cleek inquired slyly.

When Leona nodded again, he asked, "Tennant?"

"No. Jeff hasn't been seen since you ambushed him at Nugget Wash."

"Too bad," Cleek said, without sarcasm. He walked over to the stove and stood there as Dude Finn had done that first night, holding his palms to the heat. But there was none of Dude's eagerness in this man's pale blue eyes.

"He looks cold, inside and out." Leona thought.

"That trick with the decoy herd fooled us," Cleek said. "We didn't find out about it until after daylight."

All the futile, frustrating anger of the past few hours rose in Leona now. It flamed in her cheeks and put a harshness in her voice.

"It took an accursed blizzard to beat me!" she exclaimed.

Cleek eyed her with an increased interest.

"So you're smart enough to know you're licked," he said. "I wondered about that."

"No," Leona objected. "If Jeff Tennant is alive there's still a chance of stopping Tate Usher."

"How?" Cleek asked.

"With a bullet."

Cleek shrugged. "Could be," he admitted and smiled thinly. "Will you go tell Doc he's needed at the TU?"

Leona was halfway across the kitchen when she stopped and faced Cleek.

"Would you be interested in owning half of the Bar Bell?" she asked abruptly.

Cleek blinked in frank astonishment. Then he glanced at the whisky bottle.

"There never was a woman could honeyfuss me for a fool, drunk or sober," he said with sly derision. "Go get Doc Medwick."

XIV

HOBO BILL WIMPLE sat at the oilcloth-covered table in Mayme Shay's kitchen and studied the wrinkled, dirt-smudged map before him—a cryptic *derrotero* purporting to be a chart to the fabulous Conquistador Cache. Crude drawings of mountains, trees, wagon wheels and crosses were among the myriad symbols, many of which now bore penciled circles.

"Look, Mayme," Wimple said, pointing proudly to the circles. "Look what I've accomplished in ten years time—explored moren' half the places where the treasure chest could be buried. You know what that means?"

Mayme Shay smiled and shook her head.

"What, Bill?" she asked.

"Why it means I'll find that hidden treasure in six or seven more years at the outside. Then I'm goin' to build you the biggest opr'y house betwixt Kansas City and San Francisco, so's it'll hold the crowds of people that'll flock to see the prettiest gal who ever danced on a stage!"

Mayme patted his shoulder. "I'm some older than I was when the Bazaar closed, Bill. Fifteen years older."

"And prettier," Hobo Bill insisted. He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her. "By grab, Mayme, you git prettier every year. I never saw the beat of it."

When he kissed her again Mayme closed her eyes and hugged him tight.

"You're sweet as cane sugar," she said softly. "You make me feel like a scatterheels girl getting her first kiss in the moonlight."

They remained like that for a little time while the tea kettle sang merrily on the stove and a gusty wind rattled the kitchen door. Then a bell, attached to the front door by a rope and pully arrangement, jangled briefly.

"Business," Mayme said. She went out to the hallway and called, "Com-

pany, girls!" as she passed the stairs.

Then she saw Jeff Tennant limp across the parlor.

"Good glory, kid—you been shot!" she exclaimed.

A whimsical smile creased Tennant's haggard cheeks as Mayme and Hobo Bill helped him upstairs. "There's a deputy on Doc Medwick's veranda," he explained, "and Lambert is watching McGonigle's Livery, so I came here."

Three kimona-clad girls stood in the upstairs hallway watching, their painted faces tense with interest. "That's him —the one they're looking for," the big blond girl said.

When Tennant was in Mayme's room and sitting on the edge of her bed, she looked at his blood-stained pantleg.

"How bad is it, Jeff?" she asked.

"Needs cauterizing, I guess." Then a sheepish grin eased his chapped lips and he said, "I could sure use a drink, if you've got a bottle hid away."

"I'll go git it," Hobo Bill declared. "Colonel's Monogram, guaranteed to cure snake bite, frost bite and romantic fever."

"I'll have one of the girls heat some water while I go fetch Doc Medwick," Mayme said.

"How about that deputy?" Tennant asked. "I wouldn't want Usher's crew coming in here after me. Might mess up your place."

Mayme smiled. "Don't you worry about it, kid. I'll make out like one of my girls has been took sick."

She went out into the hall and announced, "He's a personal friend of mine, and I don't want anyone to know he's here. One of you put on a big pan of water to heat, and make him some coffee, while I go get Doc. . . . "

Clark Morgan ate a leisurely supper in the Palace dining room and presently, as he paid his bill at the lobby desk, he asked Effie Barlow:

"Where's your men folks? I heard they came home this afternoon."

"Billy is in bed with a hurt leg and a cold that's likely to be a bad case of grippe by morning," Mrs. Barlow reported. "Joe headed straight for Stromberg's bar, said he hadn't had a drink since he left."

"They're lucky to be alive, from what I hear," Morgan said. "Tex Taylor and Dude Finn were killed outright, and they say Johnny Peebles is dying."

Effie sighed. "It's a terrible thing what trouble one man can cause. And there'll be no peace until he's caught—or killed."

Morgan nodded agreement and went out on the street. When he passed the livery he saw Sheriff Lambert standing in the doorway, talking to Tay McGonigle.

"Any news of Tennant?" Morgan called.

"They tracked him from Petty's shack, until the snow petered out," Lambert said. "He was headed this way."

MORGAN went on to Doc Medwick's house and nodded a wordless greeting to Goldie Rimbaugh who sat well back in the veranda shadows smoking a cigarette.

"Miss Medwick ain't home," Rimbaugh reported. "Mayme Shay came after Doc for one of her girls that's awful sick. Doc not bein' home, Miss Medwick went instead."

"So," Morgan said, and turned back down the steps.

As he neared McGonigle's Livery, he stopped abruptly and said, "I wonder," and saw that Tay was alone now.

Crossing the street to the stable, Morgan asked, "Where's Sam?"

"Went over to the hotel for a cup of coffee," the liveryman said, and when Morgan turned away, asked, "Somethin' up?"

"I'm not sure," Morgan said, precise as always. "But I have a suspicion that Jeff Tennant may be hiding at Mayme

Shay's house."

Tay McGonigle watched Morgan walk toward the hotel.

"A plague on ye," he whispered, and crossed Main Street without hurry.

But once in Sashay Alley the little Irishman ran as fast as the mud would allow. He was so out of breath that he could scarcely speak when he barged into Mayme Shay's parlor and found Hobo Bill coming from the kitchen with a pitcher of hot water.

"Is Jeff here?" Tay demanded wheezingly.

Hobo Bill eyed him with obvious surprise.

"Jeff who?" he asked.

"Jeff Tennant."

Bill Wimple chuckled good-naturedly. "What makes you think Tennant would be here?" he inquired.

"Ye witless ape—is he, or ain't he?" McGonigle demanded. Then, seeing Mayme Shay on the upstairs landing, Tay called, "If Jeff is up there go tell him they're on their way here to get him!"

Jeff Tennant heard that. He watched Jane as she placed a compress on his wound, knowing that she had heard it also. But he saw no change in her face. It had held a strictly impersonal expression since the moment she had entered this room and said, "Dad is away, Jeff. I'll do what I can."

Now, as Mayme came in, closely followed by Hobo Bill, Tennant said, "I'll have to get out of here."

"But where will you go?" Mayme demanded.

Tennant had no answer for that. "I'll figure it out after I leave," he said.

"You're in no shape to ride," Jane counseled, bandaging the wound as she talked and keeping her eyes strictly to the task. "Even if you were, they're watching the Bar Bell."

She finished tying the bandage and turned away, not looking as he reached for his pants.

Hobo Bill helped him into them.

"I know a place you could hide, Jeff," Hobo Bill said, "and it wouldn't be far to walk."

"Where?" Tennant asked, buckling on his gunbelt.

"The Bonanza Bazaar. Most of the roof has caved in, but Mayme's old dressing-room is still in good shape. I was there the other day, sort of rememberin' old times."

"That's just the place!" Mayme declared. "It's at the southwest corner of the building, Jeff. You can go in the back way from the alley."

Tennant stood up, balancing against the wobbly weakness of his knees and an odd empty feeling that made him teeter on his high heels. He glanced at Jane and found her gaze fully on him, and couldn't identify her expression. Gravity still masked her mouth so that her lips were straight and inexpressive.

But there was a change in the way she looked at him. Her lamplit eyes were not coolly impersonal now. Nor calculating. There was an expression in them he had never seen before.

"Thanks for saving my leg," he said, and hoped she would smile, wanting that much to remember.

But she didn't smile. She said whisperingly, "I'd do as much for—" Her voice seemed to fail.

"For a dog," Tennant said, and made his own bitter reckoning on the expression in her eyes—disgust. He thought, "She despises me," and wondered how this could be so.

She stood by the doorway with her face averted as he went out, passing so close that her hair made a distinct and familiar fragrance for him. He had a queerly thrusting impulse to take her head in his hands, to bury his face in the fluffy softness of her sorrel hair.

HOBO BILL followed Tennant from the room.

"I'll bring you a blanket and a bait

of grub," he promised, "soon's the coast is clear."

Tennant limped to the stairway, keeping his eyes on the front door. Perspiration dripped from his armpits as he descended the stairs, step at a time.

"Ruth," he heard Mayme say, "you'll be the sick one that Miss Medwick is doctoring," and Hobo Bill said urgently, "If Sheriff Lambert comes snoopin' you be sure to act like you're ailin', Ruth. Ailin' real bad."

Tennant limped through the kitchen where the tantalizing odor of fresh-boiled coffee reminded him how long it had been since he had eaten. When he went out the back door the crisp night air was like a cold wave breaking against him. He had felt hot and feverish in the house but now, as he moved cautiously across the dark yard, he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering. There had been no snow south of Commissary Creek this afternoon, but the west wind was so bitter cold that Tennant turned up his mackinaw collar to protect his ears.

Turning into Sashay Alley, Tennant probed the dark thoroughfare for sign of traffic. All the lamplit windows were on the south side of the alley, its north side consisting of backyards behind Main Street's business establishments. He stood close to an abode wall and watched a Mexican plod past with his blanket-wrapped shoulders hunched against the wind. Then Tennant crossed the alley and had reached the Bonanza Bazaar's rubble-littered rear doorway as three men came hurriedly along the dirt sidewalk.

"Lambert and two helpers," Tennant thought instantly.

He stepped to one side of the doorway. He stood there while the three men passed.

"I'll watch the back door, Sam," he distinctly heard Clark Morgan say.

Sardonic amusement twisted Tennant's lips. Jane's husband-to-be didn't want her to see him. Morgan, he guessed, would be embarrassed to meet Jane in such a place. He would resent her going there even on a mission of mercy.

Tennant felt his way through the Bazaar's wreckage of fallen beams, wincing as his wounded leg bumped against a section of capsized roofing. And at this moment, with his leg hurting at each step, he remembered the poem Jane had quoted: "Rebels ride proudly in the sun, counting the victory already won."

Well, he wasn't riding proudly now. He was limping through dark places like a chased coyote. And Jane despised him. That, he thought grimly, was the worst defeat of all. And the most astonishing. It had never occurred to him that Jane could despise him, that she would look at him as though the sight of him sickened her.

Tennant collided with a crumbling partition. He cursed, and lit a match and saw a sagging door with a faded star painted on it.

"The star's dressing-room," he reflected, absently holding the match until it burned his fingers. "Well, I'm the star."

Cobwebs clung to his face as he went inside and sat on a dusty couch that creaked wearily at his weight. The musty odor of mildew and mold and rain-soaked rubbish was trapped in this ancient room. He wondered how it had been in the old days when Mayme Shay had changed gowns here and Hobo Bill Wimple had called to pay his respects.

The smells had been different then. There had been perfume, and powder, and the fine feminine scent of a woman's hair. But now there was mildew and the mournful wail of wind prowling an abandoned place.

"'Rebels ride proudly,'" Tennant muttered, and laughed, and sat there in the dark with his head in his hands. . . .

Clark Morgan was waiting at the

back door of Mayme Shay's place when Sheriff Lambert came out.

"Tennant ain't in there," the lawman said. "We searched every room and he ain't there."

"What about Jane?" Morgan asked. "Is she taking care of a sick girl?"

Goldie Rimbaugh had come around through the yard in time to hear this.

"She didn't look sick to me," he said. "She looked fitter'n a fiddle, layin' there in that nice soft bed."

"How did she look to you, Sam?" Morgan asked.

"Healthy as a heifer," Lambert said. "She kept her eyes shut but she sure didn't look sick. And when I asked what was wrong with her Miss Jane just shrugged and said she wasn't sure."

Rimbaugh glanced up at the shed roof, which ran along the rear of the house.

"If you'll give me a boost I'll go up there and take a look-see," he suggested.

"Good idea," Morgan said.

He helped Rimbaugh reach the roof and watched the TU rider negotiate its slanting, shingled surface on hands and knees.

RIMBAUGH crept up to a window where lamplight showed beneath a curtain that wasn't entirely lowered. He remained there for fully five minutes before coming back and dropping to the ground.

"What did you see?" Morgan asked.

Rimbaugh chuckled. "She's no more sick than I be," he declared. "She's sittin' up on the bed with her legs crossed, readin' a book."

"Is Miss Medwick with her?" Morgan asked.

Rimbaugh shook his head. "The blonde is all alone, and she's wearin' the fanciest red rosebud garters I ever saw."

"That means just one thing, Sam, Morgan said impatiently. "Tennant was here. That's why Mayme Shay came after Doc. But Tennant was warned—and got out just ahead of us."

"Who'd of warned him?" Lambert asked.

"Tay McGonigle. I told Tay about my suspicion."

Goldie Rimbaugh glanced up at the window. "How about me stayin' here, in case Tennant should come back?" he asked.

"No," Morgan decided with a tone of authority. "You go with Sheriff Sam and take a look at McGonigle's Livery. Tennant could have made it there while we've been here. I'll wait for Jane."

Lambert started off with Rimbaugh. Then he stopped.

"You ought to have a gun, Clark—just in case," he said.

"Couldn't hit anything if I had one," Morgan muttered. He walked around the house and stood near the front veranda where the wind couldn't get at him. When Jane came out he tipped his hat and said censuringly:

"Never thought I'd have to wait outside this place for you, dear."

Jane showed no surprise, taking his arm and walking with her head tipped against the wind.

"How's the sick girl?" Morgan asked casually.

"Not very sick," Jane admitted. "Let's hurry, Clark. It's so cold."

"A bad night to be out," Morgan said. Then he asked, "Is Tennant badly wounded?" and watched her face.

Jane glanced at him, showing a brief disappointment.

"He's shot in the leg," she said.

"So Tennant had you come to a parlor house to doctor him!" Morgan exclaimed with more passion than Jane had ever heard in his voice. "What a disgraceful, degrading thing—to involve my future wife in such a place!"

"Are you ashamed of your future wife, Clark?" Jane asked quietly.

"Of course not. But I resent Tennant

dragging you to a parlor house."

"He sent for Dad," Jane explained. "He was quite surprised to see me, and not very pleased."

"Where did he go?" Morgan asked.

Jane didn't answer for a moment. They were passing the Bonanza Bazaar's roofless walls when she asked:

"You hate him, don't you, Clark?" Then, not waiting for an answer, she said, "Jeff didn't say where he was going. He just limped outside, with his hand close to his gun. I felt sorry for him, Clark. He looked so—so beaten. I think he realizes now that there's no chance of the Bar Bell winning."

"He doesn't deserve sympathy," Morgan muttered. "No decent person would do the things he's done."

"That's not why you hate him," Jane said. "Tate Usher has done things that weren't decent, and so has Idaho Cleek. But you don't hate them, do you, Clark?"

He made no reply.

"It's because Jeff slapped you," Jane said presently.

Morgan nodded. He halted and pulled her against him.

"I should have hit him back," he said urgently. "But I knew he could whip me, and I couldn't bear the thought of you seeing him do it. I'll never forgive him for that slap. I've lain awake nights, thinking about it, and despising myself for not fighting back."

"You couldn't help it," Jane murmured. "You couldn't fight any more than Jeff could keep from fighting. Don't you see, Clark?"

"No," Morgan said, calmness returning to his voice. "All I see is that Jeff Tennant tried to force me into a fight I couldn't win, for no other purpose than to belittle me in front of you."

"Poor Clark," Jane said, walking close to him.

"Why do you say that?" Morgan asked suspiciously.

"Because you need revenge so terribly, and there's no way for you to get it."

"There'd be a way, if I could find Tennant tonight," Morgan announced. "I'd slap him back, Jane—and keep on slapping him."

That surprised Jane so that she turned to peer at his face.

"Because he's wounded, Clark?" she asked.

"Because I hate him," Morgan muttered.

They were at Jane's front gate now. Tate Usher and Idaho Cleek rode up from the bridge.

"Any sign of Tennant?" Usher asked.

"He's in town," Morgan said, positive about this. "It's just a matter of smoking him out."

"Good night, Clark," Jane said, and walked to the veranda.

"Then we'll find him, by glory, if it takes all night!" she heard Usher exclaim.

XV

AT SOME time during the night Jeff Tennant awoke to find a lighted candle burning in a tin can beside the couch. For a moment he couldn't orient himself, then he saw the bottle of whisky on the floor and became aware of the patchwork quilt that covered him.

"Hobo Bill kept his promise," Tennant thought.

When he reached for the bottle he lost his balance and fell off the couch, taking the quilt with him. He loosed a groaning curse and laid there for a time with his lips tight pressed while successive splinters of pain clawed his wounded leg. The floor was damp, its coldness soaking into him.

"I've got to get up," he thought, dreaded to move his leg, and decided to take a drink first. When he picked up the quart bottle it seemed heavy but he saw that it was less than half full.

"I'm weak as a rabbit," he muttered, and took a drink.

The whisky was cold to his mouth, but it felt warm in his stomach. Presently he drank again and he was sweating when he got back onto the couch. Afterward he noticed the paper-wrapped sandwich on the floor. Bracing himself against the dizziness that came each time he moved, Tennant picked up the sandwich—thick beef—which he ate with relish. Then he took another long pull at the bottle and blew out the candle.

A whimpering wind prowled through the Bazaar. The sound of it made Tennant shiver. He pulled the quilt up around his ears and wondered what time it was. Must be close to daylight, he reckoned, and decided to stay awake. But he was sound asleep when Jane Medwick came in and said: "Wake up, Jeff."

IT WAS daylight now and Tennant blinked his eyes, scarcely believing what he saw. For Jane was offering him a sack of doughnuts and a fruit jar filled with hot coffee.

"How do you feel?" she inquired.

"Good, now," Tennant announced. He took the coffee and doughnuts. "Would the girl also do this for a dog?"

"The girl didn't say that," Jane insisted, and watched him eat for a moment. "I meant I'd do as much for you any time."

"You mean that?" Tennant demanded.

Jane nodded. "I felt so bad I couldn't quite finish saying it."

"Then you don't despise me," Tennant said, and let the pleasure of that knowledge show in his voice and in his slow-forming grin.

"Where did you get that notion?" Jane demanded.

"At Mayme Shay's. At first you scarcely glanced at me, then you looked as if the sight of me made you sick."

"It did, Jeff, to think how high a price you'd paid for—for nothing," Jane said gently. "You were wounded and had no place to go. You couldn't even stay at Mayme Shay's. I thought about that after I went to bed. Every time the wind howled I thought of you with a wounded leg in this cold place."

"Then it was pity I saw in your eyes," Tennant said. He glanced at the diamond ring on her left hand. "So you're going to marry Morgan."

"On the fifteenth," Jane murmured. "You'll be gone by then."

"Gone where?" he asked.

"You'll leave Bunchgrass Basin, won't you—soon as you're able to ride?" And when Tennant shook his head, Jane asked urgently, "But how can you stay in a country where there's a reward for your capture, dead or alive?"

"How much reward?" Tennant asked, curious about this.

"One hundred dollars, put up by the county."

A mocking smile slanted Tennant's darkly bearded cheeks.

"They don't place a very high value on my hide," he reflected and was drinking the last of his coffee when Clark Morgan stepped into the room.

"Clark!" Jane cried.

Morgan didn't look at her. He came directly to the couch.

"Curse you!" he said in a queerly breathless voice, and struck Tennant in the face.

Surprise and a sense of utter disbelief ran through Jeff Tennant. He dropped the fruit jar and tried to kick free of the cumbersome quilt but Morgan pounced on him instantly, pounding at his face with both fists. One of Morgan's knees made an intolerable, grinding pressure against Tennant's wounded leg. He grunted a curse and put all his strength into a desperate attempt to push Morgan back, but the merchant clubbed him with a hard right to the temple.

TENNANT fell back. He tried to target Morgan's fiercely scowling face. His eyes didn't focus properly and he missed.

"Here's where I take a licking," he thought, then something seemed to explode against his face. A tremendous burst of dazzling light blinded him and there was a queer, rythmic throbbing in his ears. After that, for a time, there was nothing at all. . . . .

When Tennant opened his eyes he saw Jane's tear-stained face and wondered why she had been crying. He got up on his elbows, groggily shaking his head. He wiped his bleeding lips on an uphunched shoulder, peered about the room.

"When did Morgan leave?" he asked.

"Just now," Jane said in an emotion-choked voice.

Tennant considered her for a long moment, sensing the change in her. She seemed hysterical and bewildered. There was a startled expression in her tear-misted eyes as she came over to the couch and explored his bruised face with gentle fingers.

"Do you feel all right?" she asked.

Tennant nodded, and was aware of the pungent odor of whisky. Then he noticed that her right sleeve was wet to the elbow. The thought that came to him now seemed so ridiculous that he rejected it at once. But even as he refused to accept such a fantastic explanation, Jane said worriedly:

"I can't understand why I hit him."

Tennant grasped her by the shoulders.

"You mean you hit Morgan with the whisky bottle?" he demanded.

Jane nodded. "I don't remember picking it up," she said soberly. "Clark was pounding you, and you weren't fighting back. Then I hit him on the head with the bottle. It was awful, Jeff. He fell down and groaned and I thought I'd killed him."

A spasmodic hoot of gusty laughter burst from Tennant.

"You hit Morgan with a bottle!" he exclaimed.

Then he tilted back on the couch and laughed until tears coursed down his fist-scarred face.

"It's not funny," Jane objected.

"You hit Morgan!" Tennant gasped gleefully, and let laughter claim him again.

"Stop laughing at me!" Jane protested.

But now she was laughing too, so Tennant said, "I'm not laughing at you, honey—I'm laughing with you!"

* * * * *

Tay McGonigle was watering horses at the livery trough when Doc Medwick drove up shortly after eight o'clock.

"How's things at the Bar Bell?" Tay inquired, taking charge of Doc's horse.

Medwick got down and stamped his feet.

"Terrible," he muttered. "Huffmeyer has a concussion, Lunsford's arm is broken and Shakespeare Smith froze both his feet."

"How about Kid Peebles?" Tay asked.

"He died at four o'clock this morning," Doc said wearily, and walked over to the sheriff's office.

"You look like I feel," he greeted Lambert.

"Up all night huntin' Tennant," Lambert said sourly.

"Then you wasted your time," Doc said, and slumped into a chair. "Tennant didn't kill Red Naviska."

"Who says he didn't?" Lambert demanded.

"The same one who said he did—Johnny Peebles. Johnny knew he was dying. He got scared toward the last, like a kid afraid of the dark. Just before he died Johnny told me how he shot Naviska, mistaking him for Ben Petty. He said Cleek and Usher put him up to saying it was Tennant. They told him he'd hang, otherwise."

Lambert loosed a long sigh. He said smilingly, "So now I've got no legal reason for arresting Tennant."

"None at all," Medwick muttered. He eyed Lambert thoughtfully for a moment. "You've kept Tate Usher on your blind side all along, Sam. He's the one who needed arresting."

Lambert bristled at once. "What has Usher done that I could arrest him for?" he demanded. "Tate ain't killed nobody!"

"No, Sam, but I'm convinced he framed Jeff Tennant into prison. He tried a similar trick on Ben Petty, making it look as if Petty had killed Ed Peebles. And now we know the Naviska deal against Jeff was a frame-up."

"But I still ain't got legal cause to arrest Usher," Lambert insisted.

"Perhaps not," Doc admitted. "But you've got to release your TU deputies, and do it quick. Is Usher in town?"

Lambert nodded. He frowned, not liking this at all.

"That means tellin' Tate about Kid Peebles' confession. And Tate'll deny it, sure as shootin'."

MEDWICK got up, walked to the door, and turned.

"You'll have no moral right to interfere with Jeff, when the showdown comes," he said.

"What showdown?"

"The day he goes after Usher with a gun."

Lambert grimaced. "Bein' a sheriff durin' a range war is a poor way to earn a livin'," he complained.

"I know of a worse way," Doc said, without sympathy.

"What?"

"Being a doctor, during a range war," Medwick muttered and was facing the door when Clark Morgan opened it.

The merchant was pale, and excited. He took off his hat and showed Doc a bruise.

"Does it need your attention?" he asked in a quavering voice.

Doc fingered it, finally shook his head. "How'd you get it, Clark?"

"You would never guess," Morgan said.

"Jeff Tennant?" Medwick asked.

"Well, yes, in a way of speaking," Morgan admitted, and turned to Lambert. "You can go get Tennant at the Bonanza Bazaar. He won't give you any trouble. I knocked him out."

"You knocked Jeff Tennant out?" Lambert blurted.

"Yes," Morgan said and contrived a bragging tone that was convincing.

Lambert put on his coat and walked with Medwick into Sashay Alley. When they reached the Bazaar's rear doorway the sound of laughter led them to the dressing-room.

Doc Medwick sniffed the whisky-laden air. He peered suspiciously at Jane.

"What's the joke?" he demanded.

Tennant pushed Jane away from him.

"You're not arresting me, Lambert," he said sharply, and had his gun half drawn when Doc announced:

"There's no charge against you, Jeff. Kid Peebles confessed to Naviska's killing!"

"So," Tennant said. He looked at Medwick as if still not thoroughly convinced. "Then what's Lambert doing here?"

"Sam is going to see that you reach my house without being troubled by his TU deputies," Doc said.

Lambert glanced at the whisky bottle on the floor.

"Is that what Morgan knocked you out with?" he asked.

"Why, no," Tennant said. "Morgan is too much of a gentleman to use anything but his fists."

Jane laughed. She took Tennant's arm.

"Let's go home, Jeff," she said. "Your bandage needs changing."

Which was when Doc Medwick no-

ticed that the diamond ring was missing from his daughter's left hand. . . . .

For five days, while Tennant loafed on the parlor lounge, Jane spent most of her time in the kitchen, preparing such bounteous meals that Doc said teasingly:

"Anyone would think you were trying to get him fat enough to kill off."

And Jane, who had never been more cheerful, said evenly: "Perhaps that's what it amounts to."

On the third day, Bravo Shafter had called to ask about Tennant's condition and to say that Leona, who was nursing three injured men, couldn't leave the Bar Bell but that she would like to see him as soon as he could ride.

"Tell her I won't be coming back to the Bar Bell," Tennant said. "The ramrod job is all yours, Bravo."

Then, while they were eating their noon-day meal on the fifth day, Tennant said casually:

"Guess it's about time I moved to the hotel."

"What's the rush?" Doc asked. "Doesn't Jane's cooking suit you?"

"The best meals I've ever eaten," Tennant declared, smiling at Jane. "It's just that—well, I've always made it a practise not to ride grubline at one place too long. Wears out your welcome."

But Jane wasn't fooled at all.

"You want to be where you can watch Usher when he comes to town," she said quietly.

"Usher and Cleek are in town now," Doc said. Seeing the swift frown on Jane's face, he asked, "Did you see them ride past, Jeff?"

"Yeah," Tennant said. "I saw them."

Then, without looking at Jane, Tennant got up from the table. He went into the hall, put on his hat and mackinaw and went quickly outside.

THE sunless air was damp cold but there was no wind. Tennant limped to the gate and opened it, the hinges creaking loudly. When he closed the gate he saw Jane's face at the kitchen window. He waved, and carried the picture of her wistful smile with him as he tramped the road's frozen mud.

When Tennant came to Biddle's barber shop he peered through the front window, to see Windy comfortably enthroned on the barber-chair. A thin smile edged Tennant's lips.

"Windy will like this," he thought, and stepped inside, saying, "Go tell Tate Usher to come out on the street so I can get a shot at him."

Biddle's eyes bugged wide. "You—you mean it?" he demanded.

Tennant nodded, and when the barber made no move to go, Tennant said sharply:

"Go tell him."

"Sure," Biddle agreed excitedly. He started out the door, then came back for his derby. "Jumpin' hoptoads!" he exclaimed and ran out and said again, "Jumpin' hoptoads!"

Tennant stood in the doorway. When Biddle hurried into the Palace Saloon there was no movement on Main Street until Tay McGonigle came out of the hotel and walked toward the livery. Recalling how disappointed the little Irishman had been at missing out on the Stromberg fight, Tennant was tempted to tell him what was coming. But it occurred to Tennant that if Idaho Cleek made this a two-to-one showdown, Tay might get no pleasure from it.

Tennant watched the Palace.

"Maybe Usher won't come out," he thought. "Maybe I'll have to go in after him."

Doc Medwick came along the plank walk, carrying his black satchel.

"Good luck, Jeff," he said gravely, and went on toward the Senate Hotel without stopping.

Perspiration greased the palm of Tennant's right hand. He wiped it on his pants and swore morosely, know-

ing what a long wait would do to his nerves. A man's imagination always got the best of him at a time like this. It made him go through a fight a dozen times before the fight started.

Tennant wiped his palm again. He said, "The devil with waiting," and limped across the street's frozen clods.

He was within twenty feet of the Palace when Tate Usher stepped through the batwings and stopped on the stoop's front edge.

"You looking for me?" Usher called, a plain note of suppressed excitement in his voice.

Tennant halted at once.

"Yes," he said, and eyed Usher with rising wonderment. Tate was alone and yet he seemed wholly confident, almost careless, in the way he stood there blandly smiling.

"Well, here I am," Usher announced, the words sliding into sly laughter.

The effect of that laugh on Tennant was like a match flame igniting powder. All the contempt and all the hatred of three long years fused into an urge to kill. Anticipation now was a gnawing hunger and a raw wild eagerness rasped his voice.

"Draw, cuss you—draw!" he shouted.

Then, as Usher glanced at Idaho Cleek who stood at the saloon's west corner, Tennant understood instantly why Usher appeared so confident. This was going to be as it had always been—two to one. Usher and Cleek. Mostly Cleek. It would never be otherwise. Even here on Main Street, with spectators to witness his yellow-cored cowardice, Tate Usher wouldn't fight alone.

A sighing curse slid from Tennant's lips. The thought came to him that he had a choice here, that he could honorably withdraw from so unfair a fight. But there would never be a better deal; never be a time when the deck wouldn't be stacked against him.

"Well?" Usher taunted.

As if impatient of delay, he reached for his gun with such deliberate slowness that Tennant thought fleetingly, "He's forcing me to draw but Cleek will do the shooting!"

Tennant snatched his gun from holster. Ignoring Cleek, he fired at Usher while the big man's clumsy draw was being completed, slamming three bullets into that broad target and seeing it flounder sideward across the stoop. Then he looked at Cleek.

For a hushed interval astonishment had its way with Jeff Tennant. The TU ramrod leaned indolently against the saloon wall, thumbs hooked into gunbelt. He hadn't drawn and he showed no intention of drawing now. Tennant waited, not quite sure, and wanting to be sure, wanting to know why Cleek had doublecrossed his boss.

Tate Usher had expected Cleek to do the shooting. The TU boss had been so sure of it that he had forced a showdown deliberately. And Cleek had let Usher die without lifting a hand in his defense!

XVI

QUICKLY Doc Medwick hurried over to the Palace stoop and knelt beside Usher's sprawled body. Big Sid Stromberg came out and stared at Idaho Cleek as if seeing him for the first time.

"What in thunderation happened?" Stromberg asked.

Cleek nodded at Tennant, said dryly, "He was too fast for Tate."

Lee Pardee and Goldie Rimbaugh stood in front of Vedder's shop, Pardee supporting a relined saddle on one shoulder. "Usher got it hisself!" he exclaimed. "He finally got it!"

Tennant holstered his gun. He had not taken his eyes from Cleek and now he called:

"You're all through in Bunchgrass Basin, and you're leaving."

"No," Cleek said. "I ain't through and I ain't leaving." A mirthless smile

briefly altered the composed set of his dark features. "Tate and I owned the TU together, Tennant. Now I own it alone."

That astonished Jeff Tennant. "You'll need proof," he declared. "Legal proof."

"I've got it," Cleek declared, a bragging insolence in his voice. "The partnership paper was signed and witnessed by Judge Maffit last week. It's in a sealed envelope at the courthouse."

"So that's why you didn't side Usher," Tennant accused.

Cleek shrugged, not bothering to deny this, and Tennant recalled another incident that had puzzled him and that was now easily explained—Idaho's warning at Nugget Wash. Cleek had refrained from drygulching him so that he might live to do what he had done today—kill Tate Usher.

"The partnership paper doesn't change things," Tennant said stubbornly. "I'm giving you one day's time to get out."

Cleek peered at Tennant a long moment, as if teetering on the thin edge of a showdown here and now.

"I own the TU and it'll take a good gun to drive me off it," he finally said.

Then he walked to his horse at the hitch-rack, climbed into saddle and rode down Main Street. When he passed Jane Medwick at the edge of town he said:

"No use to hurry, ma'am. Shootin's all over."

"Who won?" Jane asked breathlessly.

Cleek halted his horse. "Tennant," he said, and seeing her relief, added a cryptic warning, "Tennant won't be so lucky, next time."

He rode on then and Jane hurried into town, wanting to see Jeff, wanting to touch him and to know that he was all right. There was a crowd in front of the Palace. She saw Jeff standing off to one side with Dude Rimbaugh and Lee Pardee. When she came close she heard Jeff say:

"You boys been lucky up to now. Get out before your luck changes."

"Sure," Rimbaugh agreed.

They moved off and Jane hurried to Tennant, her flushed face smiling and here eyes brightly shining. But all she said was:

"Jeff!"

The news of Tate Usher's death ran the length and breadth of Quadrille within an hour. By suppertime it was the topic of conversation in Fremont Street homes and the adobe huts of Sashay Alley. If anyone regretted Usher's sudden demise there was no mention of it publicly. Jeff Tennant was the town's hero, not so much for winning a gun duel with Usher as for his ultimatum to Idaho Cleek.

"I always knowed Jeff could beat Cleek," Billy Barlow bragged. "Cleek knows it too, or he'd of drawed against Jeff."

This was in the hotel dining room within sound of Clark Morgan who was eating supper with Sheriff Lambert.

"Gun talk," Morgan complained. "That's all you hear. But I say Tennant has no right to force Cleek off the ranch he now owns. Gun might doesn't make legal right."

"Well," Lambert said, "gun might made the TU. All Usher's land grabs was within the law but it was gun might that put 'em over."

Even Effie Barlow felt differently about Tennant, for now, as she served Sheriff Lambert she said:

"Jeff certainly changed things all around, killing Usher like he did. It'll be all right for Ben Petty to come back, won't it, Sam?"

"Any time," Lambert assured her.

Effie smiled. "I'll write to Rose tonight," she exclaimed. "It'll be so nice to have her home."

"She won't be back here," Joe Barlow predicted. "She'll be in the Tailholt Hills with her husband. And we'll be

up there too, soon's we sell this danged hotel."

"But suppose Idaho Cleek stays at the TU," Effie argued.

"He won't," young Billy declared. "I'll bet he's on his way out right now, just like Jeff told him. Look how Pardee and Rimbaugh left, not even waitin' to git their warbags."

"I know," Effie said, "but there's nothing to stop Cleek from hiring more men."

WHICH was approximately what Jeff Tennant was trying to tell Doc at the Medwick supper table while Jane listened attentively.

"I fought Usher because he framed me into prison," Tennant explained. "But I've got a better reason for fighting Cleek."

"What?" Medwick asked.

Tennant looked at Jane, a mute question in his eyes.

Jane nodded. "It's because Cleek was Usher's club over the small outfits," she said thoughtfully, "and there'll be no chance for men like Joe Barlow and Ben Petty while Cleek remains at the TU. That's your reason, isn't it, Jeff?"

"Yes," Tennant said, smiled at her and thought, "She's lovelier right now than she's ever been."

When Doc had gone off for his poker game and the dishes were put away, Tennant sat on the parlor lounge with Jane close beside him.

"The man," he said, "has a confession to make. But first he wants to kiss the girl."

"So?" Jane prompted.

Tennant took her in his arms. He supported her head, tilting it so that the lamp on the piano lighted her eyes.

"The exact color of campfire smoke," he whispered, and kissed them in turn. Then he kissed her ears, and her chin and the soft white hollow of her throat.

He lifted his head, smiling, and looked at her lips. But he made no move to kiss them.

"Haven't you forgotten one important place?" Jane asked.

Tennant shook his head. "I'm saving it till last," he said with a boyish grin. "Until after the confession." Then, reverting to the sober tone he had used to introduce this subject, he said, "The man did wrong, signing up to fight Usher for a hundred cows and five bulls. He had no right allowing the Barlows to risk their lives helping him win such a prize. So he lost the prize and won a girl—a girl who hits her prospective husbands with whisky bottles."

And then, while her lips were sweetly curved with smiling, he kissed them in the fashion of a man relishing a delicacy long delayed. . . .

Jeff Tennant awoke to find sunlight streaming in the window of his hotel room. He got up at once, liking this first sight of the sun in a week. He was pulling on his boots when he remembered what he had told Idaho Cleek.

"One day's time."

And remembered telling Jane that he would start for the TU about noon. "Cleek," he had said, "will probably be gone before I get there."

"You don't believe that," Jane had said, and when he left she had promised gravely, "I shall pray for you, Jeff."

Billy Barlow came in with a pitcher of hot water.

"Ma says she's got a presentment that Cleek will be waitin' for you to run him off the TU," the boy announced. "You reckon she's right, Jeff?"

"She might be," Tennant admitted. "Women seem to know about such things."

He went to the wash stand, limping a trifle.

"Is your leg healed enough so's you can ride?" Billy asked.

Tennant nodded, knowing what was in Billy's mind. He washed his face and combed his hair while Billy

watched. When he buckled on his gunbelt the boy asked: "You goin' to ride out there this afternoon?"

"Yeah," Tennant said.

They went down to breakfast, Billy sharing Tennant's table and not speaking until the meal was over. Then, as Tennant took out his Durham sack, Billy inquired secretively:

"Do you ever git scairt before a gun fight, Jeff?"

Tennant nodded. That seemed to surprise Billy. He peered at Tennant's steady fingers rolling the cigarette.

"You don't act the least bit nervous," he said. "You didn't look scairt when you faced Usher and Cleek yesterday."

"It doesn't show on the outside," Tennant explained. "It's a feeling inside you, deep down."

Billy thought about this for a moment in squint-eyed silence.

"Like the way I always feel just before I git onto a bronc that's sure to pitch?" he asked. "A sort of all-gone feelin'?"

"Yeah," Tennant said. "Just like that."

"Gosh," Billy said, and grinned. "I didn't think anybody else ever got that kind of scary feelin' but me!"

"Everyone gets it," Tennant assured him. "They don't talk about it, is all."

TENNANT went over to the livery and asked Tay McGonigle if he could buy a team of horses on credit.

"Ye can," the little Irishman said, "and a good wagon to go with thim. Ye figgerin' to build a new cabin at the Roman Four?"

Tennant nodded. "Did that Bar Bell horse come here after I turned him loose at Mayme's the other night?"

"Nope—must've gone back to the ranch."

"Then I'll need to borrow a horse and saddle for this afternoon," Tennant said.

"Consider it done, although I think ye'll be a-wastin' of your time ridin' out there, Jeff. It's in me mind that Cleek has hightailed for the tules, after the way he acted yesterday. Ye would've thought he was a North-of-Ireland dude runnin' from a banshee."

This seemed to be the consensus among Quadrille's menfolk. But when Tennant called on Mayme Shay to thank her and Hobo Bill for their fine favors, Mayme insisted on fixing him a steak so rare that blood oozed from it.

"You'll need strength and courage when you face Idaho Cleek," she declared. "The dirty devil will fight like a cornered rat."

And that, although he tried not to think about it, was how Tennant expected it would be. Cleek had sidestepped yesterday believing there was a chance to wait it out. Considering this, Tennant guessed there might be another reason. Idaho had a reputation for fast and accurate shooting, but in all the time he had been in Bunchgrass Basin, Cleek hadn't drawn against a man who was also fast and accurate.

"Maybe I looked good against Usher yesterday," Tennant thought, and felt a rising confidence. Cleek might not be quite as nerveless as he appeared to be.

At one o'clock Tennant rode slowly past Doc Medwick's house. Jane didn't come out, nor show herself at a window, which seemed odd. He glanced back once, half-expecting to see Jane come running out the gate. But there was no sign of her.

Disappointment seeped coldly through him, yet presently he thought, "It's better this way," and felt a sense of relief. Jane had been close to tears when they parted last night. Perhaps that was why she hadn't come out to wish him luck.

Recalling the fine evening they'd had together, Tennant smiled reflectively. Jane was wearing his ring now. An engagement ring. But there was no diamond in it, for it was fashioned from

a horseshoe nail. They'd made new plans together, deciding to build their house a section at a time. First would come a one-room cabin, which would later be the kitchen. Afterward they would add a large parlor and a bedroom.

"Poco-a-poco," Jane had said smilingly, which was the Mexican way of saying, "Little by little."

Tennant grinned, remembering how he'd once refused to consider marriage until he had a fitting home for his bride, and how easily Jane had talked him out of that idea last night.

"We'll share a shack of dreams," she'd said, "and build it into a home."

But mostly she had talked him out of it with her eyes, and the frank, sweet pressure of her lips.

There wasn't enough warmth in the sunlight to thaw the frozen mud. Ice rimmed the edges of Commissary Creek at the crossing and a thin coating of snow covered Tonto Flats. Tennant saw several TU steers, some of them pawing at snow-shrouded grass and all of them ribby gaunt.

He got to thinking about the ill-fated drive, and what a huge difference that failure had brought. If the steer drive had succeeded he would still be the Bar Bell ramrod, Jane wouldn't have broken her engagement to Clark Morgan, and Tate Usher would be alive. It seemed ironical that a shift in the wind could have caused such radical change in the lives of so many people.

Leaving the road, Tennant quartered into the Tailholt Hills, passing Ben Petty's shack and later pausing to consider the forlorn emptiness of the Roman Four. He thought, "It'll look different a month from now—if I'm lucky this afternoon." It occurred to him how much he had to lose in the shootout with Idaho Cleek, how infinitely much more than he'd ever had to lose.

Tennant was past Menafee Camp when he saw the rig ahead of him and recognized its occupants almost at once —Jane and Doc Medwick. Surprise ran its brief course while they heard him and looked back, their faces partly hidden by upturned coat collars. Why, he wondered, were they driving toward TU? He had guessed the answer before Doc explained:

"This was Jane's idea. She wanted me handy, in case you need some medical attention afterward."

"Then it's to be a duel with all the fixings," Tennant said jovially, wanting to dispel the gravity that was like a dark veil on Jane's face.

She smiled up at him then. "I know you'll win," she said with quiet confidence. "It's just that I want you patched up quick in case you're wounded, so you can start work on our cabin tomorrow."

"No rest for the wicked," Tennant complained.

"No chance to talk you out of it, is there Jeff!" Doc asked presently.

Tennant shook his head.

"Think you can beat Cleek's draw?" Doc asked nervously.

Tennant nodded. "We'll know for sure in a few minutes," he said, and rode on at any easy lope, sitting tall and straight in the saddle. . . .

IDAHO CLEEK came out of the office and peered at Baldy Walsh who stóood in the bunkhouse doorway.

"See anybody coming?" he called irritably.

"Not a sign," the cook said.

"Then go turn some dogs loose," Cleek ordered. "I ain't had any target practise for a week."

Baldy went to the pens, opened a gate and chased four male dogs into the yard. Then he stood close to a protecting corner of the cookshack while Cleek drew and fired. Idaho missed the first dog, over-shooting by a foot or more. He cursed, holstered his gun and tried again. The dog yelped and col-

lapsed, briefly threshing.

Cleek killed the next two with swift, sure precision, missed the fourth which ran across the yard with its tail between its legs until Cleek knocked it over without seeming to take aim.

"Chouse out some more," Cleek ordered, reloading his gun.

"There ain't no more males," Baldy reported.

"The devil with males!" Cleek exclaimed. "Turn loose some dogs and be blasted quick about it!"

"Sure," Baldy said, not liking the queer, crazy look in Cleek's eyes.

He hurried over to the pens, let out three females, and noticed that one of them had a litter of pups. He tried to turn the mother back, but she got away and so did two of her wabbling puppies.

Baldy was closing the gate when he saw a rider cross the Rio Pago. "Here comes Tennant!" he said at once.

But Cleek, already firing at the dogs, didn't hear him. A bullet struck the pup's mother. She fell, and got up, dragging one hind leg.

"Don't shoot her!" Baldy protested. "She's got pups!"

Cleek laughed and fired again, killing the dog as she crawled toward her fat, fluffy pups.

Baldy watched the puppies sniff at their dead mother.

"You shouldn't of killed her," he said, and swore dejectedly as Cleek killed the pups with two shots.

"You're just a chicken hearted old has-been," Cleek jeered and reloaded his gun.

"Them pups was real cute," Baldy muttered.

He saw Tennant ride up behind the house—and saw the gun Tennant aimed at him.

"Don't stand there like a sniveling old woman," Cleek shouted impatiently. "Turn loose another batch of targets."

Baldy hurried to the pens and wondered if Tennant was going to shoot Cleek in the back.

"Serve him right," the cook mumbled. He was opening the pen gate when he heard Tennant call sharply:

"Make your play, Cleek!"

Baldy looked around, saw Cleek go stiff as a fence post. Idaho had his gun out. But Tennant was behind him and Idaho didn't move. He scowled at Baldy and shouted:

"You cussed doublecrosser!"

Baldy shivered, and saw a rig out at the edge of the yard and was wondering about that when Tennant said:

"Holster your gun and I'll do the same, Cleek. Then turn around and draw."

"Sure," Idaho agreed.

He started to holster his gun and Baldy saw Tennant do likewise. But then, with just the snout in leather, Cleek whirled.

The rest of it was almost too fast for Baldy to watch. At the exact instant Cleek whirled and fired, Tennant dropped flat on the ground. Then Tennant's gun exploded twice and Cleek's shoulders jerked each time. Cleek tripped over a dead dog. He fired one more shot as he went down, the bullet splashing mud a yard behind Tennant.

Tennant got up and contemplated Cleek's motionless shape for a long moment.

"Was it a fair fight, Baldy?" he asked presently.

"Awful fair," the cook announced gustily. "Too danged fair, in fact!"

Then Baldy watched Tennant limp across the yard to meet a sorrel-haired girl who came running toward him. There were tears in the girl's eyes. But she was smiling.

"Jeff!" she cried. "Oh Jeff!"

●

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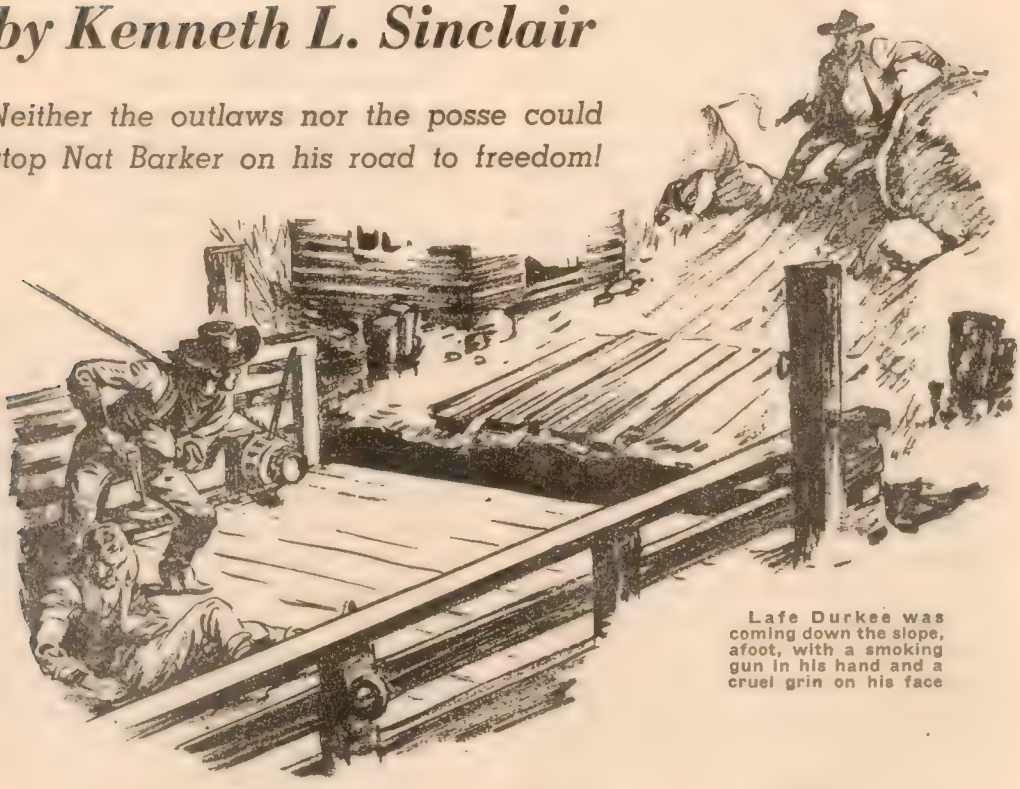
by Kenneth L. Sinclair

Neither the outlaws nor the posse could stop Nat Barker on his road to freedom!



Lafe Durkee was coming down the slope, afoot, with a smoking gun in his hand and a cruel grin on his face

THE young ranny slowed his lathered bronc, there where the trail dipped sharply down toward the shore of Mustang River. He wanted to catch his breath before he started the steep, zig-zag descent. But the main reason was that he wanted to send a wary glance raking back toward Cibola town.

The dust of the rider pounding his trail hung ominously in the heat-shimmering air. The young ranny figured that his pursuer was about a mile back.

His mouth pulled tight. He kneed the bronc downward, rearing his thin, lithe body back in the saddle for balance. He was thinking that he'd have mighty little time to argue with the old ferryman.

On the way down, swinging back and forth among the big boulders that studded the slope, he unbuttoned his shirt and dug out the old single-action .44 that he had found near Vard Ash-

ley's badlands hangout, and had kept carefully hidden against this day. Satisfied that the weapon was as ready as it would ever be, he stuck it under his belt.

"Hey!" he called, as he neared the shack in which the ferryman lived. "Hey, Bill Stewart!"

The old man came out, squinting against the midday glare. His face, where it wasn't covered by his wiry stand of white whiskers, had been burned by sun and wind to a leathery hue.

"I'm Nat Barker," the young ranny said, sliding from his saddle. "Jim Ashley's cleanin' out Cibola! Him an' his bunch, they're cleanin' out the town, then they're burnin' it! When they're finished they'll come this way, and after yuh take 'em across, they aim to fix yuh so yuh can't take the law across! I heard 'em."

STEWART shook his head in slow disapproval.

"Pro'bly yuh did," he said dourly. "One of the bunch, ain't yuh? I recollect yuh was with 'em when they crossed over."

"I was with 'em," Barker admitted tensely. "But I ain't one of the bunch—I never was! Ashley allus said they found me out on the desert, after my folks had been killed by raiders. I'm pretty sure, now, it was Ashley and his bunch that killed my folks. But I've lived in the badlands since I can remember, peelin' spuds and takin' care of the few head of cows Ashley kept where there was some grass, so him and his gunslicks could eat. Mr. Stewart, yuh got to get that ferry over to the other side, and get out of sight!"

"How am I to know this ain't some trick of Ashley's? Why should I believe some uncurried kid from the badlands?"

"Yuh got tuh believe me! If yuh don't do like I say, they'll likely kill yuh!" Nat Barker was trembling. He hadn't looked for this kind of reception, on his first try at breaking away from the badlands bunch. He groped for words that would make the old ferryman understand. "I'm tryin' to help yuh. I'm cuttin' loose from the wild bunch forever."

"Reformin' kind of young, eh?" Stewart said dryly.

"I never did ride with 'em, till they brung me along on this raid. Only time I ever was out of the badlands, Ashley took me with him once to Santa Fe, when he was tryin' to sell some of the stuff he'd stole. I—" Nat faltered. He couldn't tell this wary-eyed oldster about the nights he'd laid awake, there in the lean-to where he slept, staring up into the dark and listening to the outlaws' raw voices.

He couldn't tell about the beatings, nor about the way he'd stolen shells for his gun. But he could tell him about the girl. He'd understand that—anybody would.

"I—I seen a gal in Santa Fe," Nat said, feeling color flood into his freckled face. "A purty little gal, with eyes blue like them stones the Injuns put in jewelry. She—she waited on us, in a place where we ate. She sort of smiled at me. And I made up my mind right then, to bust loose from the Bunch."

The hard, gun-steel blue of the oldster's eyes softened, then. "I don't know ary reason why I sh'd believe yuh, younker. But—yuh want I sh'd run the ferry across? What are yuh aimin' to do, stay on this side till yore friends get here?" Suspicion died hard, in the oldster.

"Not any!" Nat said promptly. "When them hombres get here, likely with the law right behind 'em, and find they got no way to get across the river, I aim to be nowhere in sight. Lead my horse onto the raft, will yuh, while I go fetch that ax from yore choppin' block."

"What yuh want that for?" Stewart

demanded, when Nat came running to the ferry with the ax in his hand.

"Got to cut yore main cable, the one the pulleys run on, after we get across. Else Ashley might have time to swim a man across and fetch the ferry back!"

Stewart protested. The river was nearly a mile wide here, yet the current was fast. A man could swim it, maybe, but he'd come out far downstream, perhaps in Black Canyon where he couldn't climb the wall. This ferry was the oldtimer's only way of making a living, and he didn't want to put it out of commission.

Nat argued, keeping his head tilted to listen for the sound of his pursuer's horse on the zig-zag trail.

BUT he didn't hear the horse. He had no warning whatever. There was just the ugly impact of the bullet striking Stewart's body, followed by the roar of the gun that had fired it, somewhere behind Nat.

Stewart's head jerked far back, his hat sailing over the rail and into the water. The oldster's knees buckled and he went down, with Nat instinctively seizing him to give him support.

The ferryman's inert body was too heavy, though. Nat sprawled on the planks, sickened by the sight of the red-welling gash along the side of the old man's head.

He rolled over, yanking the .44 from his waistband. His terrified horse was prancing wildly, his nostrils distended at the smell of blood and his ears pricked toward the shore.

Lafe Durkee was coming down the slope, afoot, with a smoking gun in his hand and a cruel grin on his face. Durkee carried more weight than he needed, with a paunch that overhung his cartridge-laden gunbelt, but he was slick lightning with a gun.

"Stand up and take it, yuh double-crossin' whelp!" Durkee called. "I'd of drilled yuh first, only I figgered the old galoot might have a gun. Now stand up! We seen yuh sneak out of town and head this way. I snuck down among these boulders so's I could hear what yuh was sayin' to Stewart. Now I'll shoot yuh!"

Nat had been scared, a time or two in his seventeen years, but nothing like this. He had some protection from the ferry's rail, but not much. For a moment he considered making a wild scramble to get behind his horse, but it wasn't fair to a bronc, to use him for a shield.

Even the Bunch frowned on a man who'd do that, though their reason was that a man might need his horse later for a fast getaway.

Nat lifted his gun, gritting his teeth as he strove to control the wavering of the barrel. He had done some shooting at tin cans and cactus, there in the badlands, when the Bunch was gone on raids and the lookout who blocked the outlet trail was several miles away. But trying to line the sights on a man was something else again.

"Get back, Lafe!" Nat warned. "I got a gun, and I'll shoot!"

Durkee halted, crouching and weaving his gun this way and that as he tried to get a shot through the gaps between the heavy timbers of the ferry rail. "Why, yuh dirty little rat!"

Nat's gun bucked violently in his hand—seemingly it had gone off of its own accord. With his ears ringing from the report, and his face stinging from the burning powder-grains that had erupted from the bad fit between cylinder and barrel, he peered through the smoke.

He saw Durkee go down. And as the echoes rolled away he drew a great shuddering breath and climbed to his feet, watching Durkee until he was sure that the gunman was finished.

Then he knelt anxiously beside Stewart. The old ferryman appeared to be dead, but his wound still was bleeding,

and Nat had heard that a dead man didn't bleed. Besides, the wound was just a deep gash—shooting past Nat, it had been the best Durkee had been able to accomplish.

Nat used his hat to scoop some water from the river, sopping it gently on the old man's whiskered face. Stewart didn't stir.

SOBBING a little, the kid tried to decide what to do. For all he knew, Stewart might be dying. If he took him to the far side of the river he'd be that much farther away from a doctor. And if Nat cut the cable, there'd be no getting the wounded man back, for a long time at least.

He made his decision. After two tries, he managed to pick Stewart up and get the old man's weight balanced in his arms. Staggering under the burden he went ashore, and kicked open the door of the shack.

He laid Stewart on the bunk. He darted back outside—but his ears, sharply tuned to danger now, caught the sound of distant gunfire, coming from the direction of Cibola.

Dropping to hands and knees, he laid one ear tight to the ground. The hoofbeats of many horses came to him clearly.

He had mighty little time now. If he tried to take the ferry across, he'd likely be caught just a few yards from shore, a helpless target for Ashley's guns. If he cut the main cable the ferry would drift downstream and go into Black Canyon, and Stewart would never get it back.

The only thing left to do was pile onto his horse and run for it, heading upstream along the shore. He led the trembling bronc from the raft and put a foot into the stirrup.

But he stopped, stung by the thought that he had failed, after all, to prevent Ashley's escape.

Then he saw the big coil of old cable that lay, half hidden by the grass, a few yards upstream from the ferry. His brow furrowed, then cleared.

He led his horse behind the shack, left him ground-hitched, and ran to the cable. Grabbing the end of it, he floundered into the water, wading to the ferry and looping the cable over one of the logs.

The cable was rusty, and frayed wires cut his hands. But he got it secured. Then he scrambled onto the ferry to recover the ax.

He had time for nothing more. The dust of Ashley's wild bunch was rising above the top of the slope, when he

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dodged into the shelter of one of the big boulders and crouched there, panting from his exertions.

Ashley came down the zig-zag trail at a gallop. He did everything that way, with dash and recklessness. He claimed that his luck would never desert him as long as he kept it busy by crowding it.

Tall, darkly handsome, erect in his saddle, Ashley had been a cavalry officer once. But he'd been cashiered, and tried for robbery and murder. A spectacular escape had put him on the trail that brought him here, to the shore of the Mustang River.

"The ferry's waiting, boys!" he called. "Make it pronto!"

Nat clenched his teeth and forced himself to wait. Ashley had settled his score with Cibola town, for the hanging of a member of the Bunch. Now he was getting out of the country. Nat wanted to step into the open and shoot it out with them, but he wasn't foolish enough to put himself, a lone kid, up against a dozen armed men.

One of the bunch noticed the body of Lafe Durkee.

"Hey, Vard!" he shouted to Ashley. "Here's Lafe—shot! And where's that ringy younker?"

Ashley lifted himself in the stirrups, peering around. But the rumble of approaching hoofbeats, the sound of the Cibola posse, was sweeping nearer.

"Forget the younker," Ashley said sharply. "He doesn't count now. Get on this ferry!"

THEY crowded onto it, dismounting at the shore and leading their horses aboard. At Ashley's order, one of them cranked the ratchet, shortening one of the cables that led to the big pulleys.

There were two of those lead-cables, one at either end of the ferry. By shortening one or the other, the craft could be angled against the current so that the force of the river shoved it across.

The pulleys squealed now, starting their run along the main cable which stretched across the river, its middle portion sagging below the surface. The heavily laden ferry moved out from the shore.

Nat watched with fascinated eyes. The discarded cable, with its end fastened to the ferry's logs, was paying out unnoticed, coil after coil of it slipping into the water.

And the angry-faced men from Cibola were spilling down the trail. They fired a few shots at the ferry, shots that went wild because the range already was too long for accurate six-gun work. The wild bunch flung back derisive yells.

Nat deserted his hiding place. Running to the coil of cable, he got hold of the free end of it and tugged.

Enough turns had been removed from the pile, now, to lighten the weight that rested upon the last coils underneath. He was able to drag the end of it up the slope, to the big braced timber which served as anchor for the main cable.

He looped the end of the discarded line about the timber, struggling against the springy contrariness of it as he fashioned a crude, loose knot that would be drawn up when the strain came.

He heard the challenging calls of the Cibola men, but he ignored them, darting back to the boulder for the ax.

With the ax in his hand he climbed the big timber and poised, swinging the blade high for the first blow.

The ax bit deeply into the main cable. Again, and again. The cable frayed, twisting rapidly. The last wires parted with a sharp twang, and the end of it dropped into the grass and slid quickly to the water and was gone.

The ferry, robbed of the power which had thrust it across the current, floated idly downstream.

The wild bunch seemed stunned for a moment. Then Ashley's voice lifted a mocking, distant shout.

"That's the way yuh want it, eh?

Suits us fine. By the time yuh get two miles downstream, we'll be through Black Canyon and gone. Can't think of an easier way to get clear of this country than a nice, smooth boat ride!"

Two of the Cibola men strode toward Nat Barker, their faces dark with fury. But then the discarded cable creaked against the timber, kicking out little spurts of rust as it drew taut, and the ferry, swinging like a weight at the end of that cable, moved inexorably toward the shore.

The Cibola men were quick to get the idea. They raced along the slope, forted up among the boulders at the point where the ferry would come aground.

Ashley's bunch milled on the raft. Two of them tried to dislodge the looped end of the cable but, with the heavy drag of the current upon the ferry, the cable was drawn too tight.

Guns roared into life, on the ferry and among the fortlike boulders. Two of the wild bunch dropped. A horse reared and screamed and plunged from the ferry into the water. One outlaw started to follow, but changed his mind when he saw how the fast current laid hold of the swimming horse.

Ashley and his remaining men realized that they were helpless targets. They lifted their hands. Nat Barker rounded the end of the ferryman's shack and saw that Stewart was leaning weakly against the door jamb, watching.

"Son," the old-timer said, "I reckon yuh saved my hide—well, most of it anyway. And my ferry too. Tell yuh what—when them Cibola hombres get done stuffin' yuh with grub and carryin' yuh around on their shoulders, yuh come out and make palaver with me. For a long time I've figgered this river bank would make good grazin' range. Could be we'll start us a cow outfit, eh?"

The oldster rubbed at his whiskers, and peered slyly toward Nat. "Take two-three years, to get things goin' smooth. By which time, I reckon, yuh'll be honin' to take yoreself a trip to Santa Fe!"

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LAW-STAR FOR AN OUTLAW

THE gambling room of the Turquoise Saloon was filled to capacity that night, and the center of interest was the roulette layout, where a tall, slightly gray-haired, well-dressed man was playing the wheel alone. Not another game was in operation at that time, and the place was hushed.

"That totals seven hundred and fifty dollars, my friend," the tall man said quietly. "Are you satisfied?"

"Slim" Duarte, swarthy, white-toothed gambler, owner of the Turquoise, smiled slowly as he replied:

"Parson, I feel that I have paid well for my seat in your little church yesterday. You publicly announced that I was more than partly responsible for poor attendance at your place of worship, and that if I would attend your church, you would attend my place of business. We are even now, my friend."

"Thank you, Mr. Duarte. We both kept our word. It is my opinion that you received nothing from my sermon, so this will keep us even."

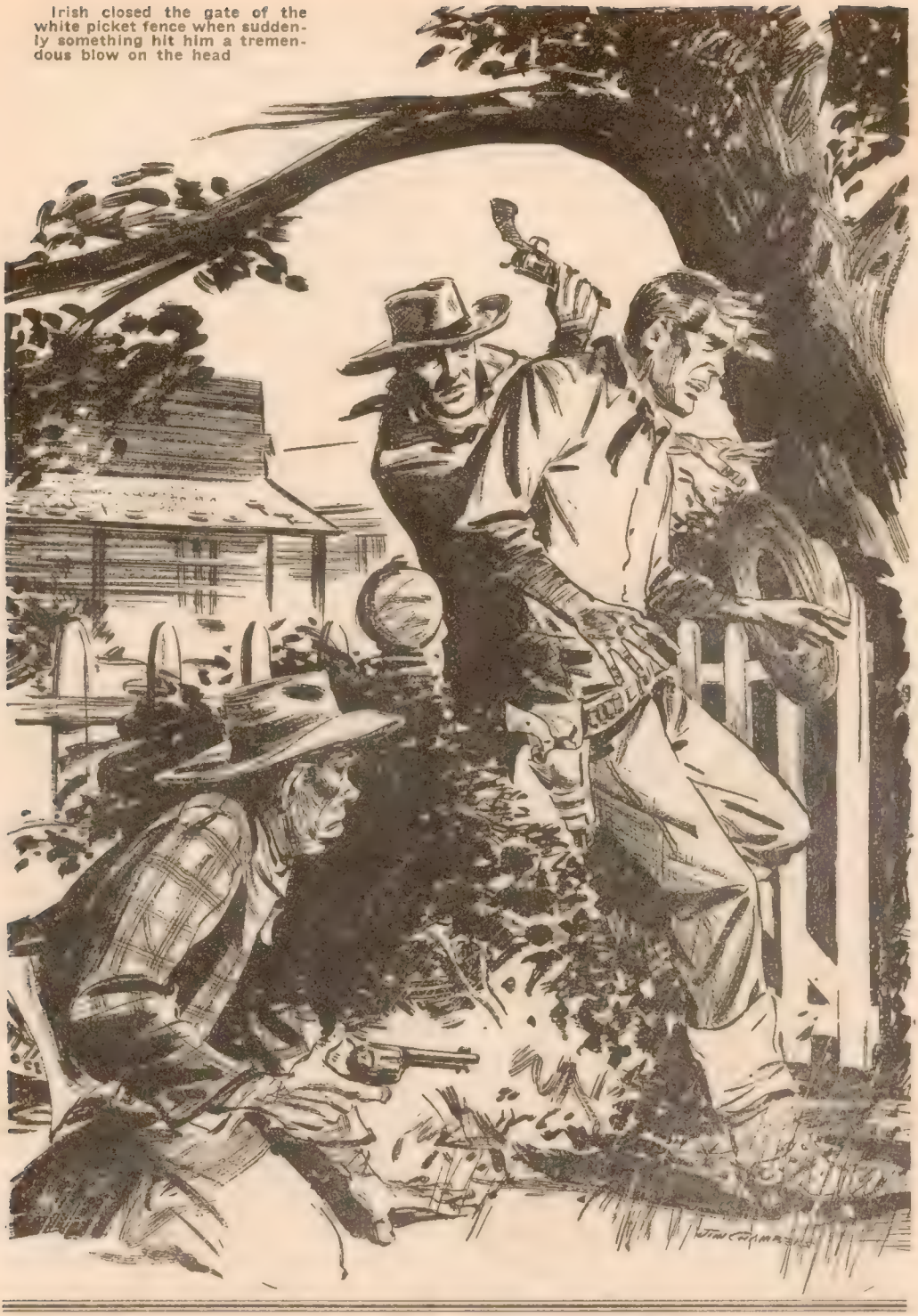
The preacher tossed the money on the layout. Slim Duarte looked curiously at the minister.

"You can use money, can't yuh, Parson?" he said quietly.

"Not that kind of money. The church doesn't gamble. We both had our fun. You smiled at me in church—I laughed at you here. Thank you for your challenge and your entertainment — and goodnight."

John Calvin, minister of the Dancing

Irish closed the gate of the white picket fence when suddenly something hit him a tremendous blow on the head



A criminal trap is set to kill three men at a ranchhouse and Irish Delaney is forced into a six-gun showdown with the evil Night Hawks of Dancing Flats! A LONG NOVELET

Flats Church, turned away from the roulette layout, and the crowd relaxed.

Standing only a few feet away from the layout was a tall, slender young man, his sombrero pulled low over a pair of hard eyes. He wore a faded, once-blue shirt, moulded to his powerful shoulders, a scarlet handkerchief knotted around his throat. Light from the oil lamps sparkled from the silver rivets on his gun-belt, and a black-handled Colt swayed outward in its short holster along his thigh.

NO ONE had noticed his arrival. Not over ten minutes ago he had tied a weary, long-legged sorrel to the hitch-rack beside the saloon. His eyes

Irish Delaney

searched the face of the minister, who stopped, looking straight at him. They had never met before, but the cowboy said quietly:

"Yuh're the preacher who buried my uncle. I heard about it, and I'd like to thank yuh. I'm Irish Delaney."

Irish Delaney! It was as though thoughts were whispered aloud, although there was not a sound.

"Oh, yes," the preacher said quietly. "You are the nephew of Henry Farley. I am glad to meet you, sir."

"Yeah, I'm the nephew of Ol' Hank Farley, who didn't have a chance for his white chip. You paid for his funeral and preached it. I'm much obliged to yuh."

Then Irish Delaney turned and the crowd gave him room to walk out. He paid no attention to them as he walked slowly through the barroom and went outside. After a few moments, the minister followed him. No one mentioned Irish Delaney.

Slim Duarte turned from the roulette layout and his eyes met those of Jim Corwin, the sheriff. Corwin was tall, slightly gray, with a deep-lined face, small eyes and a wide mouth. He had been sheriff of Dancing Flats for twelve years.

Irish Delaney had left Dancing Flats seven years ago, but there were men in the crowd who had been in Dancing Flats the day Irish Delaney rode away. Jim Corwin's eyes flashed across the faces of the crowd, before he walked away. Duarte spoke to a gambler, and the games were opened.

Almost seven years to the day since Irish Delaney rode away on a long-legged sorrel gelding. Irish was partial to long-legged sorrels. Some said it was the only color that nearly matched his own hair.

Irish had been a wild-riding kid, cold-jawed, but laughing. He had started building up his own herd. He was nineteen then—an orphan—living with his uncle, Hank Farley, who owned the 74 spread east of Dancing Flats. Irish loved Nell Shearer, daughter of Ed Shearer, who owned the Lazy S, but Ed Shearer did not want Irish Delaney as a son-in-law.

Irish Delaney cared little for Ed Shearer's likes and dislikes, and Ed Shearer knew it, but fate stepped in to help the cause of Ed Shearer. A dance-hall girl, young and rather pretty, went for a horseback ride alone and was thrown in the desert, several miles from Dancing Flats. Fate sent Irish Delaney across that same stretch of country, and Irish found her, injured and trying to find her way home.

An hour later Irish Delaney rode into

Dancing Flats, with the young lady in his arms. She couldn't sit down, because of cactus. Nell Shearer happened to be in town—and saw them arrive. Irish was laughing over it, and carried the girl into the Turquoise. This incident was grist for Ed Shearer's mill, and he made the most of it.

Two days later Irish Delaney rode into Dancing Flats, drew out all the money he had in the little bank and went over to the Turquoise Saloon. Slim Duarte had laughingly made the remark that he expected to have to hire a new soprano, intimating that Irish was in love with the dance-hall girl. Irish heard about the remark. He was leaving Dancing Flats today. Old Hank Farley said nothing. Advice was not what Irish Delaney wanted—he'd do as he pleased.

Irish didn't like Jim Corwin, the sheriff, either. Irish sat into a draw poker game, where Slim Duarte was running the play, and told the suave gambler to kick the roof off the house. It was a five-handed game, but quickly slid to two-handed. Jim Corwin was in the saloon, watching Irish Delaney, while Irish watched Slim Duarte.

IRISH had the luck of the Irish. Pot after pot went to his side of the table, and Slim Duarte realized that honesty is not always the best policy. Then the luck changed, and Irish's winnings began taking wings. Suddenly there was a lull. Duarte was dealing. Irish picked up a card and examined a corner carefully. He laid the card down and looked intently at Duarte.

Jim Corwin moved quietly to a spot behind the young Irishman.

"Look at that card," said Irish quietly.

He flipped the card with a forefinger and it landed in front of Duarte, who looked down at it. Irish was on his feet in a flash, drawing his gun.

"Marked with a thumb-nail!" he rasped. "You dirty crook, yuh're dealin' seconds!"

Jim Corwin landed on Irish's back, trying to block his gun, but the lithe cowboy threw the sheriff over his head and into Duarte, who was trying to get out of his chair. They both went down with a crash, when a leg broke off the chair. Spectators dived for cover, the bartender hit the floor behind the bar, as the real fight started.

No shots were fired. Irish ignored his holstered gun, after he had thrown the sheriff's gun the length of the saloon. They went to it with bare fists, chairs—anything in reach. Duarte went down from a left hook that almost removed his chin.

Jim Corwin was much bigger than Irish, and he knew the game of rough-house fighting, but this fight-crazy youngster was like a wild-cat. Punches didn't hurt him. He laughed and tore back, until Jim Corwin went down on his hands and knees, bleeding and too dazed to continue.

Irish backed against the bar, bloody, disheveled, his gun dangling from his right hand.

"Fine people!" he choked. "Crooked gambler, backed by a crooked sheriff, fleecin' a kid. Get up, Duarte! Walk outside, both of yuh. I want the folks to see what yuh look like. Outside, before I use a gun on yuh. Start walkin'!"

They went. It was difficult, but not far to go. A big crowd had gathered in front of the Turquoise. Slim Duarte was clinging to Jim Corwin, his eyes vacant. They were a well-whipped pair. Behind them came Irish Delaney. Jim Corwin grasped a porch post and tried to shake loose from Duarte, but without any success.

Irish Delaney's mouth laughed, but his eyes were hard.

"Damon and Pythias, folks!" he said. "Duarte played crooked and Corwin backed his play. I'm pullin' out of Dancin' Flats but before I go, I'd like

to show yuh some true love. Corwin! Duarte!"

Corwin said, "What?" But Duarte said nothing.

"Put yore arms around Duarte and kiss him, Corwin."

"Yuh're—crazy."

Irish moved in, his bleeding right fist balled tightly. "Kiss him—or we start all over again, Corwin."

Corwin kissed Duarte. It was not a pretty face to kiss. Duarte still rather vague as to what was going on, kissed Corwin, his foot slipped off the edge of the board sidewalk, and they both fell into the street, locked together.

Irish Delaney went out to the hitch-rack, mounted his sorrel and galloped out of Dancing Flats.

They heard rumors of Irish Delaney occasionally. He was leading a bad bunch in New Mexico, had been arrested near the Border by the Texas Rangers, but escaped. Neither Duarte nor Corwin ever forgot the humiliation of that day. Jim Corwin was a good sheriff. After explanations had been made, the people forgave Corwin. There was no evidence of marked cards, because somebody, possibly the bartender, had seen to that detail.

II

IRISH DELANEY was back and folks knew that he didn't merely come back to thank John Calvin, their minister. Shorty Long, the deputy sheriff, with the longest neck in the country, shook his head.

"I shore do pity them Night Hawks," he remarked in a sepulchral voice.

"You can take that remark out and bury it," said Jim Corwin.

"Yeah, but I can still think my own thoughts, Jim. If he ever finds out who killed Hank Farley—"

"Even if Hank Farley was the Ghost Rider?"

"Even if Hank Farley was the devil himself, Jim. Blood's a heap thicker'n water, and Hank Farley loved that hard-eyed kid."

"Forget it, Shorty. We'll keep an eye on Irish Delaney."

Irish Delaney rode out of Dancing Flats, heading for the one friend he used to have in the valley, Johnny McCune who owned a small ranch south of town. McCune and Hank Farley had been old cronies for years. On the little ranch with McCune was Tucson Thomas, an old rannahan, badly crippled in body but strong in spirit.

Seven years had aged Johnny McCune. He stood on the little porch of his Flying M ranchhouse and peered from under the brim of his battered sombrero at Irish Delaney. Tucson came to the doorway, his skinny waist encircled with a flour-sack, a skillet in his hand.

"Howdy, Mr. McCune," Irish said. "Tucson Thomas, how are yuh?"

"I'll be a pug-nosed pelican!" snorted Tucson. "Irish!"

"Irish Delaney!" gasped Johnny McCune. "You—you darned kid!"

The two of them fairly swarmed into Irish, whose eyes were not hard now. Perhaps the moisture softened them up. He didn't know what sort of a reception he could expect. This was great.

They led him into the house, seated him in the one rocker, and demanded an explanation of his return.

"You never wrote to anybody," accused Johnny. "Not anybody."

"No, I don't reckon I did. I made a fool of myself before I got out, and maybe nobody wanted a letter from me."

"Hank did, Irish."

Irish drew a deep breath, staring at the floor. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I reckon Hank did. I'm sorry, Johnny."

None of them said anything for a while. Then Irish said:

"How have things been with you two, Johnny McCune?"

Corwin landed on Irish's back, trying to block his gun, but the lithe cowboy threw the sheriff over his head and into Duarte

"Jist fair, Irish. You heard about Hank."

"I heard he was killed by night riders, but I didn't get any details. A cowpuncher down on the Border told me. That is, he didn't exactly tell *me*—he was just talkin'. How'd it happen?"

"Irish," replied McCune," about two years ago the Ghost Rider showed up in this country. He rode a gray, dressed in gray and wore a gray mask. He was a pretty bad hombre, Irish."

"Was?" queried Irish.

"Be that as it may," replied the old cowman, "he held up banks, stages, gamblin' houses and a couple mines. He never missed. It was a caution the way that hombre stretched his luck. Everybody was lookin' for him. He worked alone and—"

"Did he?" interrupted Tucson.

"He was always seen alone," corrected McCune. "He wasn't doin' business all the time. Mebbe two, three months would pass, and when everybody thought he was through, he'd pull a job. He must have stole a fortune. Well, one night he stuck up the train at Broken Fork, cut off the express car, and got himself forty thousand. He killed the express messenger and—"

"He didn't do no such thing," interrupted Tucson. "The evidence proved that he didn't, Johnny."

McCUNE took a deep breath, looked at Tucson before going on.

"Well, mebbe," McCune said. "He herded the engine crew back to the express car, and they swear the car was unlocked, the messenger layin' on the car floor, dead as a mackerel."

"That's what I mean," said Tucson. "He had a pardner. When the messenger opened the door, tryin' to find out what was the matter, this feller shot him. The Ghost Rider couldn't have done it, 'cause he was in the engine cab all that time."

"And then what?" asked Irish.

"Two days later," said McCune slowly," the sheriff and deputy rode in at Hank Farley's ranchhouse, and they found Hank laying on the front porch, shot full of holes. He was dressed in a gray suit, a gray handkerchief mask tied around his neck. Down at the corral was a skinny gray horse, wearin' one of Hank's saddles. There was a piece of cardboard tied to Hank's shirt, and on it was written, 'When the law fails, the Night Hawks do the job.' "

IRISH sat there staring at the sunlight through the open doorway. He muttered, "The Night Hawks, eh?"

The two old men nodded.

"When the law fails," said Irish. "Is this the only job done by the Night Hawks?"

"The only job of that kind," replied Johnny.

Irish looked up quickly. "Other kinds?" he asked.

"Yeah. Only a short time ago I was arrested for brandin' an unweaned calf, belongin' to Buck French. The calf disappeared, but they gave me a hearin', anyway, and the judge excused me, because there wasn't any evidence.

"A few days later I got a letter from the Night Hawks. They told me they'd give me sixty days to sell my ranch and git out of the country. They also told me to pay Bucky fifty dollars damages. The letter said, 'When the law fails, the Night Hawks do the job.' "

"And he paid Buck French the fifty," said Tucson. "I'd have seen 'em all fryin' in brimstone!"

"You'd have paid—just like I did, Tucson."

"What did Buck French say?" asked Irish.

"Well, he didn't want to take the money. Said he didn't have it comin', and that his business didn't concern the Night Hawks, but I told him I'd feel safer if he took it."

"Had his hand out all the time he was talkin'," said Tucson.

"Is Buck still as poor as he used to be?" asked Irish.

"No, I think he's better off than he used to be. Still brags about what he's goin' to do next year."

"We could use that fifty dollars," declared Tucson.

"I saw that preacher in town," remarked Irish.

"Reverend John Calvin? Oh, yeah. Fine feller, Irish. I asked him to let me share the expenses of Hank's funeral, but nope. He's been here three years. Awful well liked, especially by women."

"What happened to my uncle's outfit?" asked Irish.

"That was a queer deal, Irish. It seems that some relatives of Buck French died and left money to Buck. I think it was twelve thousand. Anyway it was more money than Buck ever seen before. He put it in the bank. Long about that time, Hank Farley asked the bank for a loan, but didn't get it. He was pretty mad about it.

"Well, somebody said to Buck, 'Why don't yuh lend Hank the money?' They explained about interest and all that, and Buck made the loan. It was eight thousand, I believe. Buck was a nuisance. He rode out to the ranch and looked it over, every little while, actin' like he owned it.

"Well, sir, when Hank was killed and Buck realized that he owned the ranch, he was sore as a boil. He wanted his money, too. Yuh see, Hank didn't have many cows left. But Buck had to take it. He moved out there, 'cause it was a better house."

"How about a little chow?" asked Tucson. "You ort to be hongry."

"I am, Tucson. Thank yuh a lot."

AFTER Tucson left, Johnny McCune said quietly:

"Yuh're aimin' to stay a while ain't yuh, Irish?"

"Yeah, a while, I reckon, Johnny."

"Throw yore remains in that back room, son—it's better 'n stayin' in town. Now, now, I'm runnin' this place. Me and Tucson need new blood around here."

Irish smiled wryly. "With me and the Night Hawks both in the same country, there might be blood, yuh know."

Johnny nodded grimly. "Step lightly, son. They ain't no clingin' vine outfit and yuh're too young to shed hot bullets."

"I didn't come here to set in the shade, Johnny."

"Yuh didn't come here to be planted on the side of the hill above Dancin' Flats, either, didja?"

"Johnny, are you sellin' out in sixty days?"

"No! Oh, I see what yuh mean. But I'm an old man and when yuh get old, Irish, yuh don't want to run."

Irish rolled a cigarette, his eyes somber. After it was lighted, he said casually:

"Johnny, what became of Ed Shearer? Still runnin' the Lazy S?"

"She got married, Irish."

"She?" Irish looked up at the old cowman. "I asked—"

"Yeah, I know yuh did. She married Al Briggs."

"Oh, is that so," Irish said, and examined a thumb-nail.

"You knowed him, Irish. He owns the general store, and drinks like a fish. 'Member that girl yuh found out in the cactus? After you left here, she found out about you pullin' out—and why. She went to Nell Shearer and told her just what happened. That little devil was as indignant as a bee-stung bear. She heard what Slim Duarte said, too, and she rode him with hot spurs. Then she quit and pulled out. They said she was followin' you."

"Is that so?"

"Shore was. Mighty pretty little thing. Smart, too. Man, she used words that nobody, except mebbe a mule, ever heard. I liked her."

"Grub-pile!" called Tucson from the kitchen.

III

NEXT day Irish rode over to the old 74 spread, where he had lived so long. Seven years had made few changes in the old ranchhouse, except that it was not well-kept. Buck French was there, hunched on the front steps, sewing some rips in an old pair of bat-wing chaps. Buck was a tall, gaunt person, as angular as a Joshua-palm, and just about as rough.

Irish dismounted near the porch, but Buck paid no attention until Irish walked up to him, when he held out a big hand to the cowboy.

"Hyah, Irish," he said quietly. "I heard yuh was back."

"How are yuh, Buck?" asked Irish.

"Same's ever." Buck laid the chaps aside and began rolling a cigarette. "Heard in Dancin' Flats that you was back. Place ain't changed very much, huh?"

"Very little," agreed Irish. "I heard what happened to my uncle, Buck."

"Yea-a-ah," said Buck. "They found him right where we're settin'. You heard that I got the Seventy-four, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah, Shorty McCune told me, Buck."

"Yuh don't want to buy it, do yuh, Irish?"

"What with?" asked Irish soberly.

"I didn't know. I got stuck with it."

"It's a good spread, Buck. Better than yours."

"Mebbe it's a little better. Better water. What do yuh aim to do down here, Irish?"

"Find the men who killed Hank Farley, Buck."

"Oh!" grunted Buck quietly. "Might be quite a job, Irish. Nobody knows who the Night Hawks are, and yuh might not get much help at that. Yuh know, they wanted to get rid of the Ghost Rider."

"If the Night Hawks knew who was the Ghost Rider, why didn't they tell the law, instead of killin' him themselves, Buck?"

"Nobody knows why, Irish, and the Night Hawks don't explain."

"The law could have handled it," said Irish grimly.

"Yeah, I reckon they could have—but that's how it happened. Maybe it'd be better to let sleepin' dogs lie, Irish."

"Dogs, yeah," said Irish quietly. "But they're not sleepin'."

"Yuh mean the Night Hawks, Irish? No, I don't reckon they're asleep. Did Johnny McCune tell yuh what they done to him?"

"Made him pay you fifty dollars, Buck."

"Yeah, they did. I didn't want to take it, Irish, but Johnny said he'd feel safer if I did." Buck French looked at Irish, a queer twinkle in his eyes, as he said quietly: "If yuh're able to keep yore word, Irish, maybe I can pay him back some day."

"Johnny could use the money, Buck. I'd like to clear Hank Farley's name. And, Buck, you know as well as I do that Hank was not the Ghost Rider."

Buck French drew a deep breath. "Look at it thisaway, Irish; he was caught with the goods. Before it happened, nobody could make me believe that Hank had a crooked bone in his body. 'Course, I wasn't here, and I didn't see him, but others did. Yuh got to take the word of the law for things like that."

Irish nodded slowly. "Yeah, but the law believes what they see, Buck. I don't believe what they say. Well, I'll drift back."

"You stayin' over at the Flyin' M?"

"For a few days, anyway," replied Irish. "I'll be seein' yuh, Buck."

IRISH climbed onto his long-legged sorrel and rode to Dancing Flats, where he tied his horse in front of the general store. Ed Shearer stepped out of the store and came face to face with Irish. They looked curiously at each other.

"I heard you was back, Irish," Shearer said. "How are yuh?"

"Pretty good, Mr. Shearer. How are you?"

"All right. You aimin' to stay here now?"

"Until I finish my job."

"Oh, I see. You have a job here? I didn't hear about it."

Irish's lips smiled, but his eyes were grave.

"I'm lookin' for the Ghost Rider," he said.

Ed Shearer studied that reply thoughtfully. Finally he said:

"I reckon I know what yuh mean, Irish, but I'd forget it. Yuh see, I went with the sheriff to the Seventy-Four and helped bring Hank's body to town. Yuh can't get away from that evidence."

"Yuh see," said Irish quietly, "I lived with Hank Farley. He was sort of a father to me."

"Yeah, I know he was, Irish. But I'd forget it, if I was you."

Irish shook his head. "I'm part elephant, Mr. Shearer—I never forget. Thank yuh for the advice. It was well-meant."

"You're welcome."

Irish went into the store to buy some tobacco, and ran face to face with Nell, who worked there at times.

They looked at each other silently for several moments.

"I heard you came back," she said.

"Yeah, I thought yuh would. How are yuh, Nell?"

"I'm fine, Irish." She brushed a lock of hair nervously.

Seven years had taken their toll. She was eighteen, when Irish left, and at twenty-five she had streaks of gray in her hair, lines around her eyes. She was still a pretty woman, but too mature at twenty-five. "You haven't changed, Irish," she said.

She looked the length of the store, turned back to him and said quietly:

"I wanted to find you, Irish—to tell you that—that girl told me—" Nell hesitated.

"I know," Irish said. "Johnny McCune told me. It was just a mistake. Life is full of mistakes, Nell. You married Al Briggs, they tell me."

The woman nodded slowly. "Yes, three years ago, Irish," she said. "Did you consider that a mistake?"

"I didn't mean it that way, Nell. I always liked Al, and he's done well—a lot better than I could have done. I met yore dad out on the street. He looks the same."

"Yes, Dad is fine, Irish. Where are you staying?"

"Out at the Flyin' M. Johnny McCune took me in."

"Are you going to stay here, Irish?"

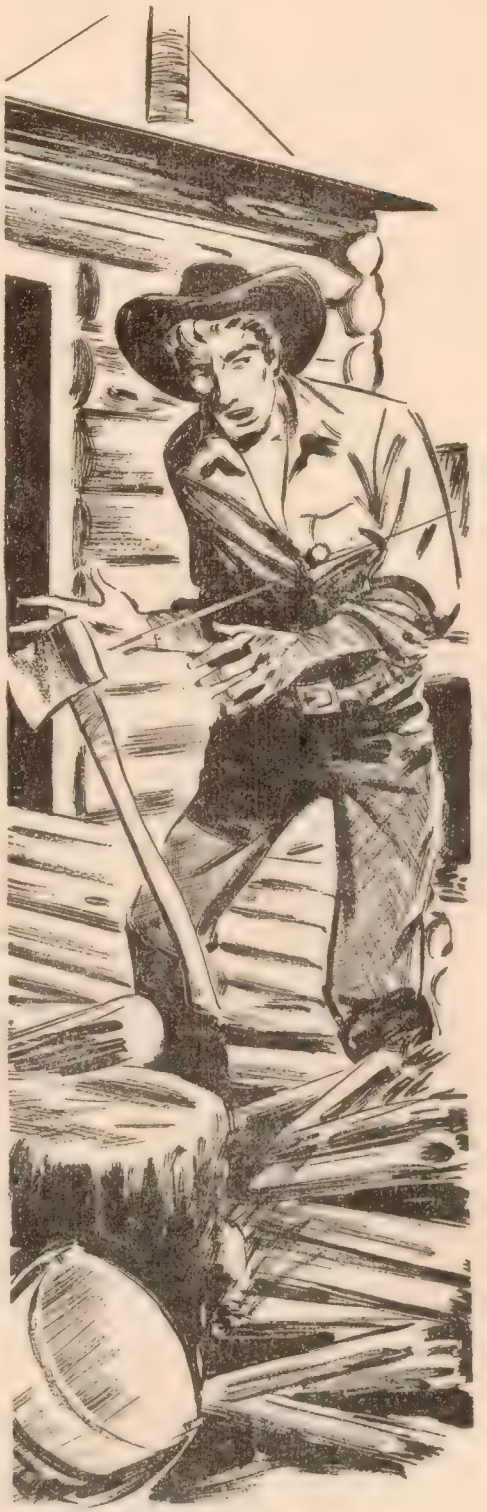
Irish smiled with his lips. "Not if my luck holds good."

Nell looked curiously at him. "I don't understand that," she said.

"Yuh see, Nell," he explained quietly, "I came here to get the men who shot Hank Farley."

"Oh! Be careful, Irish. Don't let them know."

Irish laughed quietly. "I don't know who they are, Nell, so I've got to let them know. The only way I can ever find out is to have them try to stop me—force their hand."



As he brought the blade up about waist level, something knocked the ax from his hands

Nell shook her head. "They won't give you a chance," she said.

The front door opened and Albert Briggs came in. He was a colorless sort of person, rather slovenly dressed. He scowled at Nell.

"There must be something else you can do," he said. "How are you, Irish?"

NELL walked away. Al Briggs came closer, and his breath reeked of whisky. Irish said;

"I'm all right, Al. How are you?"

"All right. What were you and Nell talking about?"

"That's kind of a foolish question, Al. After all, I used to live here and I've been away seven years. We just talked, that's all."

"Uh-huh. You keep away from her, Irish."

"I expect to, Al. She's yore wife."

"And don't you forget it."

"That's whisky talkin', Al. Sober up and don't make a fool of yourself."

"Yea-a-ah? Why, I'll tell you somethin' that—"

"You won't tell me anythin'," interrupted Irish, " 'Cause I'm goin' outside. If you have anythin' to say to me, wait until yuh sober up, so yuh can talk sense."

Irish turned abruptly and walked outside, leaving Al Briggs impotently swearing at himself. The Reverend John Calvin came in, stopped and listened to Al Briggs' tirade, and then came on into the store.

"I'm sorry," Briggs said. "I didn't see you come in."

"That's all right." The minister smiled. "I thought for a moment you were really quarreling with someone, Briggs."

"It was that blasted Irish Delaney. He just left."

"Oh, I see. Irish Delaney. I met him yesterday. Quite a lad."

"Hard-headed fool, yuh mean! He came here to run down the Night Hawks for shooting Hank Farley."

"Well, isn't that to be commended, Briggs?"

"Oh, sure. Let him go ahead and they'll plant him beside his uncle. Suits me. I never did like him, the hard-headed fool."

The minister laughed and shook his head.

"I'm afraid you haven't the Christian attitude, Briggs. And after all, what has he ever done to you?"

"Nothin'—yet, and I'll see that he don't. Can I help you?"

"Just a few groceries. Here is my list."

IV

IRISH walked down to the sheriff's office, where he found "Shorty" Long, the deputy, enjoying a siesta. Irish and Shorty had always been good friends, and Shorty was glad to see him.

"Doggone, yuh look good, Irish! Hyah, Kid, long time no see."

"That's right, Shorty. I didn't know how I stood with the law, so I thought I'd beard the lion in his den."

"Jim Corwin is out." Shorty grinned. "I reckon yuh stand all right with the law, far as I know. At least, the law of Dancin' Flats, Irish. Set down and rest yore hind feet, boy. Everybody is talkin' about you. The preacher says yuh're a crusader for the right, whatever that is."

"Preachers have never paid much attention to me, Shorty."

"Me neither. But John Calvin is a little different. You'll like him."

"I didn't come here to go to church, Shorty."

"I know yuh didn't, Irish. Everybody is talkin' about why yuh came here, and they're even makin' bets that yuh don't last a week. I hear that Slim Duarte is takin' bets on yuh."

Irish grinned slowly. "Slim Duarte is, eh? He's bettin' that I don't last, eh?"

"I don't reckon Slim has forgotten what happened the day you left here, Irish. Neither has Jim Corwin, but he ain't bettin'."

"What's yore bet, Shorty?"

"Me? I don't bet; I just hope yuh win."

"Yuh do, eh? Shorty, you've been here with Corwin for a long time, and you've got two good ears, so what about these Night Hawks? Are people scared of 'em?"

"Yeah, I reckon they're a little scary of talkin'. Nobody knows who they are, nor how many there are. They make the sheriff's office look awful bad, Irish. They leave notes, yuh know, sayin' that the law works too slow, and all that. Jim don't like 'em."

Irish smiled. "Shorty, if the odds get long enough, maybe I'll risk a few dollars myself."

"Yuh mean yuh're so confident on winnin' that you'd take a chance on yore own money, Irish?"

"Look at it this way, Shorty. If I come out on top, I can use the money, but if I'm loser—well, I can't take it with me."

"Yea-a-a-ah!" breathed Shorty. "That's right. Shucks, you can afford to bet every cent you've got."

Irish smiled. "I reckon I'll go out to the ranch and wait for the odds to get bigger. See yuh later, Shorty."

People on the street looked curiously at Irish as he rode his sorrel down the main street of Dancing Flats. Some of them shook their heads. One man said to another;

"I knowed Irish Delaney when he lived here, and he was a nice boy until he lost his temper, but he's become a rash fool, talkin' like he has."

"Packs his gun low," observed the other man pointedly.

"Yeah, and he can sling it, too. Hank Farley learned him that. When he was twelve years old he could pull a gun and hit tin cans throwed in the air. But his shootin' ability won't save him. He's buttin' his sorrel head ag'in a stone wall."

Irish Delaney realized it, too. One man against an unseen and unknown organization, an organization that would not stop at murder, made his chances very slim indeed. Irish believed that they had murdered Hank Farley, and that the only way to unmask them was to force their hand. All they would have to do would be to shoot him from ambush, pin a note on his shirt-front—and the Night Hawks would be more powerful than ever.

HE HAD a long talk with Johnny and Tucson that evening, hoping that they might remember somebody who hated Hank Farley enough to murder him, but to no avail. Neither of them had ever heard of Hank Farley having a deadly enemy. The time element meant nothing. There was no record of the Night Hawks, until they found the body of Hank Farley. It was their first job. Every sheriff in that part of the state had tried to find the Ghost Rider.

Tucson insisted that the Ghost Rider had an accomplice.

"He had to have, I tell yuh," insisted the old man. "Evidence proved it."

"But he pulled every other job alone," said Johnny McCune.

"Mebbe. Yuh can't tell—mebbe the other man hung back ready to step in if things got tough. Everybody looks for one man, and all the time there was two."

"What about descriptions?" asked Irish. "Men must have seen the Ghost Rider and knew what size he was."

"Well, I dunno about that, Irish," replied Johnny. "When a man's got a gun centered on yuh—size don't mean much."

"Uncle Hank didn't have no close friend—nobody he'd pull a job like that with, did he?"

"Uncle Hank never done it!" declared Tucson.

"Yo're just hard-headed and soft-hearted, Tucson," said Johnny.

The talk shifted to other things, and Irish mentioned seeing Nell in town.

"She's aged, don't yuh think, Irish? Who wouldn't—livin' with Briggs. He's been drinkin' a lot, and he's awful jealous of her. Briggs don't get along with Ed Shearer. Briggs spends most of his evenin's at the Turquoise, drinkin' up the profits, and I reckon she sets at home, waitin' for him to come home and cuss at her. Yuh know, Irish, he hates the preacher." Johnny grinned widely. "He's jealous of the preacher. Won't let Nell go to church."

"You're jokin', ain't yuh, Johnny?"

"Ask anybody. The preacher knows it."

"Well, I dunno," sighed Irish. "Nobody can be as foolish as people."

It was nearly midnight when they went to bed that night, and none of them had gone to sleep, when fast-traveling hoofs beat up to the front of the house. Johnny McCune slept on a cot in the main room. He lighted a lamp, picked up his gun and went to the door, for someone was knocking.

"This is Jim Corwin, Johnny!" called a voice, and Johnny opened the door.

It was the sheriff and Shorty Long. Tucson came in from one doorway and Irish Delaney from another. Irish had a gun in his hand. The sheriff looked them over, but spoke to Irish.

"How long ago did you come here, Irish?" he asked sharply.

"Before supper," replied Irish, and the other two men nodded.

"He's been here all evenin', talkin' with us, Jim," said McCune.

"Has, eh? Well, that's lucky for him."

"What's all this hocus-pocus about, Corwin?" asked Irish.

"No hocus-pocus," replied the sheriff. "Somebody shot Al Briggs tonight, and somebody stuck up Slim Duarte, and cleaned out his safe."

None of the three men had any comment to make. Irish placed his gun on the table, picked up a cigarette-paper and tobacco and began rolling a cigarette.

"And you thought I done it, eh?" he said coldly. "Thanks."

"You had trouble with Al Briggs today," accused the sheriff.

DELIBERATELY Irish lighted his cigarette over the chimney of the lamp, and squinted away from the smoke. "Trouble? I didn't have trouble with Briggs. He'd been drinkin'—and I walked out on him. What was the evidence against me in the Slim Duarte job?"

"Well, it was a masked man about yore size, Irish," replied the sheriff.

"I see. Sorry to disappoint yuh, Corwin, but I was here."

"Is Al Briggs dead?" asked Johnny.

"Dead's a door-knob," said Shorty Long. "Slim don't know how much money he's lost—somethin' over four thousand dollars."

"Was the masked man dressed in gray?" asked Tucson.

"No, he wasn't," replied the sheriff testily.

"Looks like another crime wave was startin'," remarked the deputy. "I figure the killer was also the robber. Everybody was so upset over Al Briggs that the man pried open the window of Slim's little office, slipped in and waited for Slim to come. Then he made Slim open the safe."

"Where did he kill Briggs?" asked Johnny.

"Right in front of my office!" snapped the sheriff. "I was at the Turquoise."

"Made it easy for yuh to find the body, Jim," said Tucson, dryly.

"In front of yore office," said Irish. "That's kind of funny."

"What's the difference where he was shot?" asked the sheriff.

"None, I reckon. Was Al Briggs armed?"

"He had a gun in his pocket, if that's what yuh mean."

"I could have meant that, I reckon."

"Well," said the sheriff, "we might as well go back, Shorty."

"Have yuh tried any of the other ranches?" asked Tucson. "Yuh never can tell what yore luck might be, Jim."

Jim Corwin told Tucson where he could go, and they walked out. Tucson chuckled quietly. "I like to rub Jim the wrong way," he said.

"You were pretty lucky, Irish," remarked Johnny. Irish smiled.

"Corwin wants to count coup on my scalp, I reckon, Johnny."

"I can't figure Al Briggs gettin' killed," said Tucson.

"Irish," said Johnny. "What was yore idea in askin' if Briggs had a gun?"

"I don't know, Johnny. I just wondered."

"You didn't have no trouble with Briggs, did yuh, Irish?"

"No. I was talkin' with Nell, when Al came in. He sent her away, and tried to start an argument with me about talkin' to her, but I told him he was drunk and walked out."

Tucson yawned. "Well, we might as well go back to bed."

Jim Corwin and Shorty Long went back to Dancing Flats. There was still a crowd in the Turquoise. They found Slim Duarte and told him that Irish Delaney had an iron-clad alibi.

"McCune and Thomas would lie for him," said Duarte.

"All right, Slim, think what yuh like but when two men swear he was there with them all evenin', yuh're stuck. How much did he get away with?"

"About six thousand dollars," replied Duarte grimly. "I was a fool to keep that much in my safe but it's too late now."

V

WHEN Irish and Johnny arrived at Dancing Flats next morning, the general store was closed. Ed Shearer was in town, talking with the sheriff and the minister, when Irish and Johnny rode in. Both Ed Shearer and the sheriff looked rather bleakly at Irish, but the minister shook hands with him. Johnny said:

"We thought we'd ride in and get more information."

Irish looked around on the wooden sidewalk. Jim Corwin said:

"Right here's where the body was found, Irish."

"Kinda funny—no blood-stains," remarked Irish.

No one said anything, but all five men looked at the weathered planking. Then the sheriff said:

"That's right—I didn't notice. It is kinda—funny, ain't it?"

"He must have bled," said Johnny McCune. "Usually do."

"His shirt was all bloody," said the sheriff.

"Mrs. Briggs is standing it well," said the minister. "She is very brave."

"Al was drinkin' hard all day," said Shearer.

"That wasn't anythin' new," remarked Johnny McCune. "He's been drunk for a year. Anythin' new on the robbery, Jim?"

The big sheriff shook his head. "Nothin' new, Johnny. Duarte says the man got six thousand dollars."

"I think I'll go down to the house," said Shearer. "Better go with me, Parson."

"I shall be very glad to be of any assistance," replied the minister.

They walked away together. Johnny said:

"Jim, do yuh think the killer was the same one who robbed the saloon?"

"What's the difference? We don't know who either one was. It's kind of

funny that Briggs was killed here in front of my office."

"I don't believe he was," said Irish. The sheriff looked quickly at the cowboy.

"Why do yuh say that?" he asked sharply.

"No blood, Corwin. I believe he was shot some place else and placed here."

"Nonsense! We heard the shot."

"You heard *a* shot, Corwin. There was nothin' to stop a killer from shootin' in the air, was there?"

"No, I don't reckon there was. Hm-m-m-m. Could be. But why not let us find him where he was shot?"

"And incriminate the killer?"

"Yeah, I see what yuh mean, Irish. But that don't do us any good. No matter where he was killed, it's still murder."

"Could he have been shot some'ers else and walked here?" asked Johnny. The sheriff shook his head quickly.

"He was shot plumb through the heart, Johnny."

"Then he didn't do much walkin'. Well, Irish, I think I'll walk up to the post office and get the mail."

"I'll go with yuh, Johnny. See yuh later, Corwin."

There was the usual crowd around the little post office, arguing about the murder and robbery. Irish knew many of them, and they knew that Irish had been an immediate suspect. Johnny McCune got the mail, and they walked outside. As they walked over to their horses Johnny said quietly:

"There's a letter for you, Irish, and the handwritin' is the same as on the letter I got."

"Keep it until we get out of the town, Johnny. That gang is watchin' us now."

OUTSIDE of Dancing Flats, Johnny gave the letter to Irish. It was poorly addressed in pencil to Irish Delaney, care of the Flying M. Inside was a sheet of paper on which was penciled:

DELANEY, YOU ARE A FOOL AND A BRAGGART. THE LAW CAN'T TOUCH YOU, BUT WE CAN. GET OUT—AND STAY OUT. WE ONLY WARN ONCE.

THE NIGHT HAWKS.

Irish read it aloud. Johnny McCune whistled softly.

"I kind of figured on this," said Irish.

"What are yuh doin'—kissin' it?" asked Johnny.

"No, I'm smellin' of it, Johnny."

"Yeah? Does it smell like the skunks they are?"

Irish grinned and sniffed at it again, before handing it over to Johnny, who also sniffed.

"It has the odor of a honkatonk on it," said Johnny soberly.

Irish folded the letter and put it in his pocket, his eyes very thoughtful. Johnny squinted at the bobbing ears of his horse, as he said quietly:

"Perfume on a death warrant. Hm-m-m-m. Honkatonk perfume. Yuh know, Irish, gamblers use the stuff."

Irish nodded, and they rode the rest of the way in silence. Tucson read the note, his eyes grim. Irish told him to smell of it, and Tucson sniffed audibly.

"Yuh don't suppose that the Ladies' Aid Society have turned killers, do yuh?" he said soberly.

"Some men use it, Tucson," said Irish.

"Some male critters, yuh mean. Such as Slim—well, I've smelled other gamblers, too. Most of 'em use it, I reckon. What are yuh goin' to do about it, Irish?"

"Well, it looks like a showdown might be comin'," replied Irish seriously. "I reckon I'd better move into town and—"

"Ye do nothin' of the kind!" snorted Johnny.

"I'll say yuh won't!" added Tucson. "Me and Johnny's got a bone to pick with 'em, too. Let 'em come. We're here first."

"They've got all the best of it, Tucson."

"They'll need it. I better put my bread in the oven and stir up the mulligan. I've allus said, 'A man should never die on an empty stummick.' Johnny, how are we fixed for shells for that fifty-seventy?"

"You can't hit anythin' with that old Sharps."

"Oh, can't I? Listen, Johnny—all I need is an address. I'll boil the spiders out of the barrel tonight and use a little axlegrease on the works. That gun's pretty old, but she's a great time and money saver. If that bullet hit yuh—whap! Where you was—you jist exactly ain't. No burial, no expense a-tall."

"Yuh're bloodthirsty, Tucson," said Irish soberly. "I'll bet you'll pour chloroform down that gun-barrel before you boil the spiders. . . ."

They buried Albert Briggs next day. Neither Irish nor Tucson went to the funeral, but Johnny McCune put on his Sunday clothes, combed his hair, put stove-polish on his boots and went in to pay his last respects to a man he had no respect for.

Tucson and Irish worked around the ranch, and just before noon Tucson complained about a shortage of wood for his stove. There was a pile of old corral-posts near the kitchen door, so Irish took the ax and proceeded to do a little chopping. The poles were very tough and the ax was very dull. Irish stopped trying to chop, and examined the blade of the ax. As he brought the blade up about waist-level and felt of the scarred edge, something struck the head of the ax a terrific blow, knocking it out of Irish's hands. A fraction of a moment later, from somewhere back in the hills, came the spiteful crack of a rifle.

IRISH DELANEY, his fingers numbed from the blow on the ax-head, fell flat in against the pile of old poles. Tucson yelled from the kitchen:

"What's goin' on, Irish?"

"Keep down!" yelled Irish. "Somebody dry-gulchin' us!"

"I'll fix that pole-cat!" snapped Tucson, and a moment later he came crawling through a kitchen window, swinging his old Sharps .50-70 ahead of him.

Irish started to yell at him, but at that moment another bullet smashed the lifted window above Tucson's head. The old man promptly fell back into the kitchen, leaving his rifle outside.

"Wrong winder," he said.

Irish crawled on his stomach over to the old gun, his eyes searching the brush behind the stable. There was no more shooting, nor could he see anybody on that brushy hill.

"How're yuh comin', Irish?" asked Tucson from the kitchen.

"I'm all right. Watch the hill back of the stable and see if yuh can see anybody."

"Yeah, and lose what hair I've still got, eh."

"Oh-oh!" snorted Irish. "I see him!"

Far up on the hill, a good three hundred yards away, a man on a horse was making very good time, going away. Irish, flat on the ground, rested the forearm of that ancient buffalo gun on his palm, his elbow digging into the dirt, as he lifted the muzzle several feet over the fast disappearing rider, and squeezed the trigger. The big hammer clicked. Irish relaxed and got to his hands and knees.

"Yuh know, Irish," said Tucson, leaning through the window, "I jist remembered."

"That you forgot to load this cannon, eh?"

"Yeah, I reckon I did. Didn't take time to pick up some shells. Anyway, it needs cleanin' awful bad. Prob'ly kicked the tar out of yuh, if there'd been a shell in it."

"Probably," said Irish dryly, and handed the gun through the window.

"Yuh know," mumbled Tucson, "I resent folks actin' like that."

"Have yuh got a file or a rasp?" asked Irish. "I can't cut wood with a blade like that."

"Yuh mean—yuh ain't scared they'll shoot some more?"

"That feller was pullin' out awful fast," replied Irish. "Yuh don't suppose they work in relays, do yuh?"

"I'll find yuh a file," said Tucson, "but I think yuh're crazy to stand out there like a target. They won't miss all the time."

VI

ABOUT midafternoon Johnny McCune came back to the ranch and listened to Tucson's version of what happened. Tucson even showed Johnny the ax-head with the bullet-splatter still on it.

"Pretty fair shootin', but yuh can't beat the luck of the Irish, observed Johnny.

"And," added Tucson," that other bullet smashed the winder and sunk Washin'ton's boat, crossin' the Delaware. Caught her dead-center on the wall."

"Well, that old pitcher was gettin' pretty greasy, anyway. Been up there for twenty years and that boat never moved a inch."

"How was the funeral?" asked Tucson. "Big crowd?"

"Everybody in the country, except you two. It was jist like goin' to a funeral for somebody yuh never knew. The preacher said so many nice things about Al Briggs that I had my doubts about him bein' in that casket, until I got me a look. Women all cried."

"How'd Ed Shearer stand it?" asked Tucson soberly.

"Well, I thought he was goin' to break down a couple times, but I reckon it was just a tight boot. I seen him limpin' a little."

"Who wasn't there?" asked Irish.

"You two, Irish."

"And one more, Johnny—the drygulcher, yuh remember."

"Oh, yeah!"

"Slim Duarte?" queried Tucson.

"Slim was a pall-bearer. The whole gang from the Turquoise was there, even the girls."

"That's why Johnny didn't know who was missin'," said Tucson. "Johnny's a ladies' man, don't yuh know it, Irish?"

"I never look at a woman twice!" snorted Johnny McCune.

"Yuh can't. The first look is so long that she's out of sight, before yuh can look the second time. I suppose Jim Corwin was as prom'nent as a wart on a nose."

"Well, I seen him pattin' Nell on the shoulder. She's a widder now, and I'll betcha there's plenty single men who would like to run that store. Jim Corwin is twicet her age, but I'll betcha he'll start shavin' every couple days and greasin' his boots. Not to mention Slim Duarte."

Irish smiled slowly, and Johnny said:

"Not to mention Irish Delaney, too."

"No, I'm afraid I'm too far out of the runnin', Johnny. Anyway, I'd be an awful risk for a woman. I didn't know that Corwin and Duarte had connubial aspirations."

"Whoo-ee-e-e-e!" yelped Tucson. "You better git him a e-metic, Johnny. He's done swallered a dictionary!"

"If what you said means they'd like to have her—y'betcha," said Johnny. "Pretty women are scarce around here."

"Handsome men ain't no drug on the market," declared Tucson. "You take Johnny, f'r instance, he's average."

Johnny sighed and took off his tight boots. "I dunno what's to be done," he said. "It beats me."

"You mean—about yore looks?" queried Tucson.

"No, you blasted fool—about the

Night Hawks!"

"Well," said Tucson dryly, "they'll keep monkeyin' around until somebody gets hurt, and it prob'ly won't be them."

"Next time, I hope you load that gun," said Irish.

"I'm keepin' her loaded, Irish."

"Aw, yuh wouldn't have hit him, anyway," said Johnny. "Shootin' that old coal-burner at three hundred yards is almost like shootin' that distance with a bow and arrow."

"Don't make fun of that gun, Johnny. Three hundred yards! Why, that bullet is jist startin' to go at that distance. Why, I—"

"Stop yore artillery practice and start supper. I'm hongry."

"Every time I beat yore argument, yuh change the subject."

TUCSON went into the kitchen, but came right out.

"Johnny, what day is this?" he asked.

"It's Saturday, of course."

"That's what I thought, and I don't cook no supper on Saturday nights. We allus eat in town. That's the day you allus lose yore shirt tryin' to make deuces beat a full-house. Remember, Johnny?"

"Yeah. All right, I forgot. Want to go to town, Irish?"

"Might as well, I reckon," nodded Irish.

"Might save packin' yore re-mains into town," said Tucson.

"Worry about yore own remains," suggested Johnny. "Remember, he didn't bust that window very far above yore head, Tucson."

"Aw, he was jist scared of me, that's all."

They arrived in Dancing Flats before supper time. The town was always crowded on Saturday, and the games at the Turquoise were running full-blast. Ed Shearer had opened the general store, following the funeral of Al Briggs, and customers were streaming in and out.

Irish was too restless to stay in one place, so he left Johnny and Tucson at the Turquoise and went up the street, stopping at the post office, where he asked for the Flying M mail. The woman clerk gave him a letter, addressed to him, but it was not in the handwriting of the Night Hawks.

Irish went outside to open it. He recognized the writing. It was from Nell, and said:

> Can't you come down to my house tonight? Better make it about nine o'clock; so the neighbors won't talk. I must see you.

It was simply signed Nell. Irish shoved the letter into his pocket and leaned against a porch post in front of the post office. He wondered what on earth Nell wanted to see him for. Come late, so the neighbors won't talk. Irish smiled wryly.

He met Johnny and Tucson later and they all went to a little restaurant for supper. Irish didn't tell them about the letter, but said there was no mail for the ranch.

"I talked with Slim Duarte a while ago," said Johnny. "He asked if you was in town."

"I smelled of him," added Tucson, "and he was awful sweet."

"Why was he interested in me?" asked Irish curiously.

"I don't know."

"Yuh do, too," contradicted Tucson. "He said that yore presence in the Turquoise wouldn't help his business any."

"I must be kind of poisonous." Irish smiled as he said this.

"Folks kind of feel uneasy around yuh," said Johnny soberly. "If them Night Hawks kinda open up on yuh, Irish—"

"Yeah, I know what yuh mean, Johnny. Buckshot scatters."

It was a warm night in Dancing Flats. Johnny sat in a chair in front of the hotel, his back against the wall, and

watched the people on the street. Outside the glow of lights the night was very dark. He could hear the orchestra in the honkatonk, the babel of voices in the barroom and gambling parlor. The streets of Dancing Flats were quite narrow. Irish wondered who, in that crowd, were Night Hawks, seeking his scalp. It could be anybody.

At about half-past eight he wandered over to the Turquoise, went through the barroom and into the gambling parlor, where all the games were going. Johnny and Tucson were sitting in a draw-poker game, and Irish moved over to their table, angling around so his back was against the wall. Several people moved away, and one man left the poker game.

It rather amused Irish. His sharp eyes scanned the faces of the crowd, half of them hazy in tobacco smoke. In a few minutes Slim Duarte came through the crowd, stopped to look at the poker game, but moved over close to Irish, who paid no attention to the dapper gambler, until he said:

"Delaney, I'd be a lot better satisfied if you'd leave here."

Irish looked sharply at Duarte. "I didn't get that straight, Duarte," he said. "It sounded kind of queer to me. Would yuh mind repeatin' it?"

"You heard what I said, Delaney. I don't want you in this place."

The poker game slowed down. The players had heard enough to know that something was wrong. Irish said:

"That's kind of funny. I thought this was a public place."

"I said—I don't want yuh here, Delaney."

"Just supposin' that I don't care what yuh want, Duarte."

"I'd advise you to listen to reason," said Duarte coldly.

"I know what yuh mean. If I don't go, you'll gang up on me with yore bouncers and the coyotes will have a feed Of course, Duarte, you couldn't do it alone. Yuh're too yellow for that. Yeah, I'll go out. It's the first time I've ever been bounced from a place like this, and I don't like it. I'll be outside, in case you want to carry this any further."

Irish turned and walked away, shouldering his way through the crowd, until he got outside. He was more amused than irritated. He backed against the wall of the Turquoise and looked at his watch. It was nearly nine o'clock, and he had almost forgotten that he was supposed to see Nell at that time.

He knew where she lived. It was one of the older houses in the town, set back from the street, shaded by huge sycamores. There was a light in the living room. He opened the gate of the white, picket fence, turned and closed it, when something hit him a tremendous blow on the head. He tried hard to keep his feet, but blackness enveloped him, and he passed out.

Gradually he became conscious of a terrible pain in his head, and of voices. At first they were merely a jumble of words, but they finally separated into conversation.

"Yuh can't trust him for a minute, I tell yuh," he heard a man say.

"You're not going to do it here," declared a voice. "We tie him on his horse and you take both of them to the Lost Goose. Do this job just as I planned. They'll both disappear, and everybody will figure he got yellow and pulled out."

"But if I do the other job, I won't have time. It'll take me a couple hours to finish up at the Lost Goose. I've got to do that job before McCune and Thomas go back there."

"That's right. Well, you take him out that way, fix up that job, and then go to the mine."

"Yeah, I can do that—if I hurry."

The voices died away, as though both men had left him, Irish had no idea what it was all about. His head ached too badly for concentration. He was

tied, hand and foot, lying flat in the dirt. Finally he heard a horse walking, and the two men came back. They draped Irish across the saddle and proceeded to tie him on, yanking the ropes tight. Irish wanted to protest, but was unable to talk. Then the horse started away with him, and he blacked out again.

Slim Duarte watched for Irish to come back into the Turquoise, but Irish did not show up again. He finally sent one of his men outside to scout around, but the man came back and reported that Irish Delaney was not in evidence. Johnny and Tucson were still at the poker game, unworried about Irish.

Duarte moved around, until he was near the front doorway, and went outside. He wanted a breath of fresh air. Jim Corwin, the sheriff stopped and exchanged a few words with him, but Duarte did not tell him of his talk with Irish Delaney.

"You've got a big crowd tonight, Slim," remarked the sheriff.

"Biggest in weeks, Jim. I got so full of smoke I had to come out and take a deep breath."

The sheriff went inside, and Duarte moved on down the sidewalk. Several men were coming into the saloon, when a shot blasted out from near the hitchrack. The sound was audible in the barroom, and the sheriff came out with others.

"I saw the flash of the gun, sheriff," one man said. "It's near the hitchrack."

They found Slim Duarte, lying flat in the dirt, bleeding badly from a bullet wound in the shoulder. They carried him into the saloon, back to his little office and placed him on a cot, while someone went to get a doctor.

The gambler in charge of the draw-poker table drew the sheriff aside and told him of the argument between Slim Duarte and Irish Delaney. He said:

"Delaney dared Slim to come outside."

"He did, eh? Well, that don't look good for Irish."

The sheriff saw Johnny and Tucson, and drew them aside. They had heard some of the argument.

"Jim, you don't figure Irish did that, do yuh?" Johnny said. "He ain't that kind of a hair-pin. He'll turn up around here."

"What kind of a horse did Irish ride, Johnny?"

"That long-legged sorrel, branded with a Three X Bar. It's out at the saloon hitchrack, along with our two."

"Much obliged, Johnny."

The sheriff found Shorty Long, and they went out to the hitchrack, but the long-legged sorrel was gone. The space was empty. The horse had been taken away.

"Pulled out of the country!" snorted the sheriff. "I have the worst danged luck! Prob'ly took his horse away, staked it out and came back to get Slim."

"That makes good listenin', but bad logic," remarked Shorty. "Irish Delaney don't need to murder men. He's fast enough to kill 'em in self-defense."

"Well, he'll have a job shakin' this one off, I'll tell yuh that. We're headin' for the Flyin' M, me and you, Shorty. No use goin' any other place. We'll take a chance that he'll go there, and I'd like to get there before Johnny and Tucson get back. They'd lie their souls into hell for Irish Delaney."

"I'd do a little swearin' of that kind myself, Jim, but we've got to find him, that's a cinch."

VII

JOHNNY McCUNE and Tucson Thomas went back to their poker game, not knowing that Irish's horse was also missing. Men were talking about the shooting. It had been noised around that Irish and Slim had words, and that Irish had dared Slim to come outside.

Naturally it became worse as the conversation became general.

"It looks like a job for the Night Hawks," one man said.

The remark made Johnny McCune mad, and he said:

"Yuh mean, it looks like a Night Hawk job, don't yuh?"

The argument died aborning. Johnny McCune was a tough man in any argument, and no one wanted to start trouble.

Tucson lost his few remaining chips and drew out of the game, but Johnny was playing in luck and didn't want to quit. Tucson made his way outside and walked to the hitchrack. There was enough illumination to enable him to find out that Irish's sorrel was missing. That didn't look good to Tucson. He made his way back to the poker table and whispered the information to Johnny McCune, who cashed in and drew out of the game.

"I don't like the looks of things," declared Johnny, as they went out to check up on Tucson's findings. "Why would Irish take his horse? Why would he pull out without tellin' us? I'm afraid somethin' has happened to him."

"What do yuh think we ort to do?" asked Tucson.

"We'll wait here a while, and maybe he'll come back. If he ain't back in an hour or so, we'll go home." . . .

Jim Corwin and Shorty Long saddled their horses and left town. No one saw them leave. They took the road out to the Flying M, but did not hurry.

"We'll just go *poco-poco,* Shorty," the sheriff said. "If Irish should be comin' in, we'd have a better chance to stop him."

It was very dark along the road, and there was no conversation. They drew up near the ranchhouse and dismounted. There was a faint light through the window of the main room, but Johnny had insisted on covering the windows so that nobody could take a shot at them from outside.

The two officers went quietly up to the small porch. There was not a sound around the place. They eased up on the porch and listened. A mocking-bird called softly from a tree, but there was no other sound.

Jim Corwin quietly turned the doorknob and discovered that the door was unlocked. That was not unusual, because few folks in the range country ever lock their houses. He eased the door open.

An old oil lamp burned on the rough table near the middle of the room, but there was not a soul in sight. They moved in and looked around.

"Well, that's that, Jim — empty house," Shorty said.

"Yeah, I reckon yuh're right."

Both men holstered their guns.

"We'd better kinda look around, Shorty," the sheriff said. "I don't like the looks of that lamp. Them men came to town early, and they wouldn't leave a lamp burnin' at that time. Yuh see—"

"Hold it!" snarled a voice. "Don't move! This shotgun makes a messy lookin' job. Let yore hands down and unbuckle them belts."

Two belts and holstered guns thudded on a worn Navajo rug.

"Back up, gents!"

THEY backed up a few steps. From inside the kitchen doorway came a masked man, covering them with a double-barreled shotgun, its menacing twin muzzles covering them steadily. Cautiously he picked up the two gun-belts and tossed them into the kichen.

"What's the big idea?" asked the sheriff harshly.

"The idea is—you've horned into trouble," replied the masked man huskily.

A blue cloth, which covered his head, had eye-holes cut in it. He wore an old, colorless shirt, dirty overalls, old boots, and wore gloves on his hands.

Even his gun-belt and gun were nondescript.

"Night Hawks?" queried Shorty.

"That's somethin' you'll never find out. What are you doin' out here?"

"Lookin' for Irish Delaney."

The man laughed harshly.

"He's taken care of, my friend," he said. "Don't worry about it."

"Do you know who I am?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't care who yuh are, feller. I've got a job to do, and I ain't interested in names. Here!" He tossed a short-length of rope to Shorty Long. "Turn yore pardner's back this way and tie his hands. And I want yuh to do a good job of it. No cheatin'."

"That's ridiculous!" snorted the sheriff.

"So's a load of buckshot! Turn around."

The sheriff turned around and Shorty Long proceeded to tie his wrists together. Done under the supervision of the masked man, it was a good job.

"Set him down on the floor and tie his ankles!"

"You can't get away with stuff like this," wailed Corwin.

"I'll do my best," replied the masked man. "Get down, you poor fool, before I unhook a load of this stuff into yore middle."

The sheriff got down, with the help of Shorty, and Shorty tied his ankles. Then the man forced Shorty to lie down, while his own ankles were tied, after which he was rolled over on his face, his hands yanked behind him, and the ropes applied to his wrists.

Then the masked man went over to the door, opened it and listened for several moments, before closing the door. He went into the kitchen and came back with a length of very dirty rag, which he used to gag both men very effectively.

"I can't have yuh yelpin', yuh know," he explained. "My scheme might not work, if somebody heard yuh yelpin'. Yuh see, the Night Hawks are makin' one big cleanup tonight, and you'll be in it."

He went back into the kitchen and came out, bringing a coil of thin, copper wire, which he twisted around the doorknob and flung the wire out behind him. The front door opened outward. Both men could see what he was doing, but they had no idea of his intentions. He took the end of the wire into the kitchen, and they saw the wire pull taut.

He was out there quite a while, before they saw him again. He came back, looked at their bonds and gags, and went over to the lamp, picked it up and looked down at them.

"Yuh might be interested in this little deal," he said. "When anybody pulls that door open, it'll pull the trigger on an old forty-four, pointed into a box of blastin' caps. *Adios,* you poor fools. You stuck yore noses into one too many deals. You'll be all right, until somebody comes and starts in. Enjoy yourselves."

The light went out, and they heard him shut the kitchen door. A few moments later they heard him ride away. . . .

IRISH DELANEY suffered tortures during that enforced ride. The lash-ropes cut into him with every movement of the horse, and his head throbbed like the beat of a huge drum. Finally the man left the two horses in the brush and went away. By this time Irish was beginning to realize his plight. He tried to move on the saddle, but the ropes were too tight.

He was fully conscious when the man came back and untied the two horses. They started on again, climbing the hills in the darkness, while brush whipped against Irish's unprotected head and caught at his feet. It seemed hours before the horses stopped again.

The man grunted, as he took off the

lashings. Then he took Irish in his arms and lowered him to the ground. Irish said nothing, and made himself as limp as possible. He felt better now, with the tight lashings removed. He discovered that his hands were tied in front of him, and the rope twisted around his body down to his tied ankles. Just what he would be able to do under the circumstances was hard to determine.

The man grasped Irish under the arms and began dragging him, cursing about the rough ground and the uphill pull. Finally they came to a building. Irish remembered the conversation about the Lost Goose mine. It was a deserted place, where a mint of money had been expended on a silver vein. Irish had heard that the main shaft was seven hundred feet deep. The old shaft-house was merely a ruin now, only part of the old walls still standing.

The man let Irish sag to the ground, as he stopped to regain his breath, and do a little more whole-hearted cursing. After a while he said, more to himself than to his supposedly-unconscious victim:

"I've got to have a light of some kind, or I might fall into that blasted shaft myself. There's a candle in here, some-'rs along this old wall."

Irish heard him step into the doorway, and go stumbling along over the debris. It was an almost hopeless chance, but Irish took it. He just merely turned over and started rolling down the slope. The slope was sharp, rock-strewn and uneven, but he managed to keep his head up and tried to ignore sharp rocks. Swiftly he rolled off to the left, and it seemed as though he had rolled a mile, before he was brought up against some brush, aching in every muscle and entirely out of breath.

It was so dark that he couldn't even see the outline of the old shaft-house. He heard the man come to the doorway and saw him light the candle-stub he had found. The next moment he heard the man rip out a curse and the candle went out. He had discovered the prisoner was gone.

He came swiftly down the hill a short distance, stopped short and swore some more. He couldn't even see the ground he was standing on, so how could he expect to find Irish Delaney? Irish, even in his dilemma and suffering from injuries, grinned to himself. The man went on down the slope, feeling his way, taking the straight line. He never realized that Irish had rolled far off to the left.

Irish could not see the man, but he could hear him. He crashed against a rock, and swore bitterly. Irish tested his ropes again. They were a bit looser now, especially around the ankles, and he drew his right foot out of his boot. After a little pulling and tugging, all the ropes loosened, and he shucked them off.

The man was still searching as well as he could, which was very little, indeed. Irish was not worried now. At least, he could throw a rock, if the man came too close. But the man did not come down toward him. He finally gave up and Irish heard him ride away.

Irish relaxed and sat there for a while, building up some more strength, before going any place. Also he tarried because he feared that the man might be waiting, trying to decoy him into some rash move.

Every muscle in Delaney's body was sore and his head felt very big. It was quite swollen, and his face was caked with dried blood. His holster was empty, but that was to be expected. He finally got to his feet and limped down the slope, where the man had mounted. He found his sorrel there, tied to an old snag.

VIII

BACK in the saddle, Irish Delaney felt much better. He rode slowly down the hill to a huddle of old buildings. Irish

knew that spot very well, and even in the darkness he was not confused. He realized, too, that the note was not from Nell. Someone, with a sample of her writing, had forged the note and decoyed him into a trap.

"I ought to have my head fixed," he told himself. "Nell wouldn't send me a note like that. Yeah, I reckon I'll have to have my head fixed—outside and inside both. But I'm still movin' under my own power, even if I did almost make hash of myself. All I need now is a gun."

There was an old road, which wound down the slope, twisting its way to Dancing Flats, and there was an old trail, which led past the 74, and angled out close to the Flying M.

"I better go back to the ranch," he told the sorrel. "Johnny and Tucson might be worried about me."

He picked up the old trail and started out across the hills, with the long-legged sorrel making good time. Irish began to get thirsty, but there was no water short of the 74. The action of the horse aggravated his other aches, but water was what he needed most.

He turned off the trail near the 74, hoping to find Buck French out there, but the house was dark. Irish dismounted and limped up on the sagging, old porch, where he knocked heavily on the door. When there was no response he shoved the door open and went inside.

He lighted a match and took the chimney off the lamp. It was still warm. Irish thought things over. Someone had burned that light recently. He went into the old kitchen and found water in a bucket. After he had lowered the bucket a few inches, he looked around. The place was furnished much as Hank Farley had left it. Hank usually had an extra gun around the place, and Irish felt the need of a gun.

There was an old, home-made table in the main room, and there was a crude drawer which Hank Farley had cursed every time he tried to open. Irish yanked it open. There was a Colt .45 in the drawer. Irish picked it up and looked at it, his eyes wide. It was his gun! His face was grim as he looked at the gun he had worn that evening. It was fully loaded.

He snapped the gun into his holster and walked outside, after putting out the light.

"Things are gettin' better, hoss," he told the sorrel, as he climbed stiffly into the saddle. "Let's go home." . . .

Johnny McCune got back into the poker game again, but Tucson kept watch on the street and around the hitchrack, waiting for Irish Delaney to come back to Dancing Flats. He could not find the sheriff or deputy, and decided that they were looking for Irish. It was considerably over an hour before Johnny McCune cashed in his winnings and told Tucson he was ready to go home. It had been reported that Slim Duarte was painfully, but not dangerously injured, and had no idea who shot him.

"That lets Irish out," declared Johnny McCune. "He'd never shoot a man and not give him a chance."

"Explain that to a Dancin' Flat jury," said Tucson. "They ain't interested in what's *inside* a man, Johnny."

"No, that's right. I sure hope Irish can prove a alibi. I'm jist scared that the Night Hawks got him."

"Yuh mean they'd take his horse, too, Johnny?"

"Don't ask me what they'd do. Tucson, you irk me at times."

"I don't know what that word means, but if it's goin' to shatter our lovely friendship, don't tell me," said Tucson.

"All right, I won't. Let's go home." . . .

IRISH DELANEY finally pulled in at the Flying M. The house was dark, attesting to the fact that either Johnny and Tucson were not home yet, or had

gone to bed. Stiff-jointed and limping, Irish stabled his sorrel and went up to the house. He stopped on the porch and called to Johnny McCune. It was the safe thing to do, announce the name and wait for results.

But nothing happened. Irish reached for the door-knob, when he heard a thumping sound inside the house. He drew back. It sounded like someone pounding on the floor. Funny sounds. When it was repeated Irish went around to the kitchen door, where he stood and tried to figure out what it was all about.

He realized the need for caution. Drawing his gun, he carefully opened the kitchen door, listening for any sound. Then it came again, that dull, thumping sound, coming from the main room. Irish eased himself into the dark kitchen, waited a few moments, before moving ahead. His right toe struck solidly against something near the entrance to the main room, but he quickly caught his balance, and moved ahead, his cocked gun braced at his thigh. There was not a sound.

He took a match from his pocket, reached far out and scratched it against the wall. As the match flared up he saw the two men on the floor, well-tied, staring at him. Quickly he lighted the lamp and looked down at them.

"All ready for shipment, eh?" he said. "I've heard of the law gettin' tied up, but I never saw it gagged before."

Irish dropped on his knees beside Jim Corwin and yanked away the gag. At the same moment he heard voices outside. It was Johnny McCune and Tucson, talking as they came up to the porch. Jim Corwin yelped:

"That door! Don't let 'em open it! That wire!"

Irish saw the wire, read the desperation in the sheriff's voice, and, like a flash, he fired a shot through the upper part of the door. From outside came the yelp of surprise, as the two men dived off the porch.

"The wire—get it off the door!" panted the sheriff.

Irish carefully snapped the wire loose. "It's all right, Johnny!" he yelled. "Come on in, you two. Everythin' is all right now."

He opened the door, and the two old-timers came cautiously, wide-eyed, as they saw the sheriff and deputy.

"What's the idea of shootin' at us?" demanded Tucson. "That bullet blew splinters all over us."

"It was the door, Johnny!" gasped the relieved sheriff. "That masked fool had a dynamite trap for you. If you'd opened the door, we'd all be dead!"

Irish cut Shorty Long loose, and Shorty was still too frightened to talk coherently.

"I died seventeen times," he declared. "It was awful. We heard somebody come up on the porch, and I hammered my heels against the floor. It was all I could do. Then I heard him come in the back door. Man, I could have kissed my worst enemy!"

"Here's the deal!" called Tucson. "Wait a minute—I've got to pull its teeth. There! I've gotcha!"

He came in, bringing an old, single-action Colt .44. He laid it on the table and drew a deep breath.

"There's a whole danged box of high-percentage dynamite in the kitchen," he said. "There's a box of caps, too, and this old hog-leg was wired to the box. That wire would have shot the gun."

THE men all looked at each other.

"Irish, what on earth happened to you?" Johnny said. "Yore hair is all stuck up with blood, yore face is scratched, yore clothes torn. Where have you been?"

"Oh," replied Irish, rather vacantly, "I've been pallin' around with the Night Hawks, I reckon. They play awful rough."

"Yore horse was gone," faltered Johnny.

"Yeah, they took that, too. Neither of us ever was supposed to come back, but the luck of the Irish lasted."

"Did you know that somebody shot Slim Duarte tonight, Irish?" asked Shorty Long.

Irish shook his head.

"No, I didn't know that, Shorty. Is he dead?"

"Wasn't when we left. We came out here to ask you. Yore horse was gone, and we kind of thought you pulled out. That masked brute got the drop on us."

"They got the drop on me, too," said Irish painfully. "I'm one big ache all over, and I've just started. Blow out that lamp, Johnny. We're all ridin'."

"Wait'll we get our guns on," said the sheriff. "He didn't bother to take 'em along."

"I hope there'll be trigger-pullin' to be done," said Shorty.

They all had to ride fast to keep up with Irish Delaney, and they came into Dancing Flats with a rush.

"Scatter out and find Buck French," said Irish. "I need him."

"What's he done?" asked the sheriff.

"Find him," replied Irish. "Get him, even if yuh have to down him."

IX

QUICKLY the five men separated and made a swift search. Questioning failed to find anyone who had seen Buck that evening. They all met back at the hitch-rack. If Irish was disappointed he did not show it.

"Wait here for me," he said. "I've got to find out about somethin'."

Irish disappeared in the darkness across the street. He went to the corner and looked down the side street. There was a light in the Briggs house. Irish wasn't afraid now. He limped up to the front door and knocked.

After a few moments Ed Shearer opened the door. He got a good look at Irish and stepped back.

"Irish, what happened to you?" he asked. "Yuh're all bloody and hurt!"

Nell was sitting in a rocker, staring at Irish.

"I got dry-gulched in yore yard early tonight," he said. "Nell, did you write me a letter—one I got in the post office tonight?"

"A letter, Irish?" she asked, puzzled completely. "Why, I never wrote you a letter, Irish."

"Set down, boy, you've been hurt," said Shearer. "I don't—"

"Who's been here this evenin'?" asked Irish sharply.

"Here?" queried Shearer. "Why, nobody—much. Some people did drop in some time ago, Irish. What do you mean?"

"Who was here last?" Irish looked from Nell to her father. "I want to know," he said wearily.

"The minister was here, but he left almost a half-hour ago," said Shearer.

"Much obliged," said Irish, and walked out.

Nell and her father looked at each other curiously. There had been little sense to Irish's conversation.

"Dad, he has been hurt," Nell said. "He looks terrible!"

"Been hit on the head, Nell. Somebody should take care of him."

"Irish Delaney can take care of himself, Dad."

"Yeah, I reckon he can." Shearer walked over and looked out the window, but it was too dark for him to see anything.

"Why did he ask me about a letter?" she wondered aloud. "I never wrote him any letter."

Shearer came back to the table and looked at her.

"Nell," he said quietly, "do you still—well, do you still like Irish Delaney?"

"No, Dad, I'm afraid not."

"Uh-huh. Well, I hope he won't be too disappointed."

"I hope not. I'm afraid he wouldn't

be a dependable husband."

Irish went back to the main street and stopped at the hitchrack, where the men waited. All he said was:

"We're ridin' again."

No one asked him anything more. He led the way on his sorrel and turned on the road to the 74 spread. They strung out, only a few yards apart, riding fast. There was some starlight now and the road was visible for a short distance. Irish set a fast pace, and the horses were well-blown when they pulled up just short of the ranchhouse. They could see a light there.

"Take it easy now," Irish said. "We're goin' in quiet."

"Are yuh still lookin' for Buck?" whispered the sheriff.

"For Buck and whoever is with him, Jim. Take it easy, boys."

They worked in close to the old porch. The front door was half-open. In the light from within they could see a horse standing close to the porch, its sides still heaving from a fast trip. A man was talking nervously as they stopped near the doorway.

"I did come to town!" he declared. "I tried to find you, but you wasn't home so I came back."

THE other voice asked a question, but too low for them to get the words.

"I tell yuh, he was here," Buck answered. "I left his gun in that drawer in the table, and it's gone. I don't know how he got loose. I've told yuh what happened up there. I hunted all over for him, but it was so blasted dark I couldn't see a thing. Mebbe he went back to the Flyin' M."

"I hope he did, Buck. As for you, you've bungled everything. Unless Irish Delaney walks into the house before anybody else gets there, you've put a rope around our necks. If he misses—you're a goner, Buck."

"I'm headin' for Mexico tonight."

"You're staying right here, my friend, and you won't talk."

"No, no!" screamed Buck French. "You can't—"

A gun thundered in that small room, and the concussion almost closed the door, but Irish jerked ahead and blocked it. Buck was on the floor, his head and shoulders against a table-leg, and over him stood a man, cocking his gun for the next shot.

"Hold it!" yelled Irish.

The man whirled and fired from his waist, but his bullet went wild. Irish shot deliberately through the smoke. The man was sent back on his heels, his gun-hand dropping, but he was game. He braced his feet and tried to swing the gun up again, but Irish shot again, and the man went down, striking a chair and knocking it across the room. His gun went with the chair.

Irish came slowly across the room, followed by the others. Buck French was badly hurt, but he wasn't unconscious. Irish took Buck's gun from his holster. The sheriff and Johnny were looking down at the other man.

"I must be dreamin'," the sheriff said. "This is the minister, Irish!"

"I was afraid of that," said Irish grimly. "How are yuh, Buck?"

"That yellow coyote tried to kill me," complained Buck weakly. "Get me a doctor, will yuh, Irish?"

"So you two are the Night Hawks, eh?"

"Yeah. It was John's idea. Bein' a preacher, nobody'd suspect him—he thought. He's murder crazy, I tell yuh."

"Wasn't any preacher at all, eh?" said Tucson.

"He studied for it," said Buck. "His name was Strickland. He done five years for forgery. He was the Ghost Rider, and when he had plenty money he killed Hank Farley and put the clothes on him. I worked with him, but I never killed anybody."

"You tried hard tonight, Buck," said Irish. "Nobody pulled on that front

door. Did this hombre kill Al Briggs?"

"Yeah," whispered Buck. "Al was drinkin'. He thought the parson was stuck on his wife, and he came to have it out with him. Walked in on the parson, who had put on his workin' clothes. I picked Al up, put him in front of Corwin's office and fired a shot in the air. He shot Slim Duarte tonight, too. He was murder crazy."

"I never dreamed of anythin' like this," said the sheriff. "I'm still weak over it. Irish, how did you find all this out?"

"I found my six-shooter in that table drawer over there tonight. It put the deadwood on Buck, but I had to get the brains of the outfit. Somebody sent me a decoy note today and signed Nell Briggs' name to it. I got knocked out in front of her house.

"When I left you fellows at the hitchrack, I went down there. I had to be sure she didn't write it. She didn't. I asked them who had been there and they said the preacher. Then I knew who I was lookin' for."

"How did yuh know, Irish?"

"The Night Hawks sent me a letter and it had perfume on it. When I went into the Briggs house tonight, I smelled that same perfume. It had to be the preacher."

SHERIFF CORWIN'S mouth opened in surprise. Then he scowled.

"Shorty," said the sheriff, "you go get the doctor. No use movin' 'em now."

"Yuh won't have to move the preacher—not for medical attention," said Tucson.

"Buck," said Irish. "Can yuh hear me?"

Buck said in a whisper, "Yeah, I can hear yuh."

"What did the parson do with all the money he stole?"

"It's hidden under the church," whispered Buck. "Anyway, he said it was. He was murder crazy, I tell yuh. We had a cinch, if he'd played the game, or if that blasted Irish Delaney had stayed away. Do I get a doctor pretty soon?"

"I'd like to go back to the ranch and stretch out," said Irish. "I'm so darned sore I can't hardly stand up."

"You boys go home," said the sheriff. "I'll wait for Shorty and the doctor. Much obliged, Irish."

"Yuh're welcome, Jim. See yuh later."

They cut across the hills to the Flying M, traveling the trail that Irish used before that night. At the ranchhouse Tucson put away the three horses, while Irish and Johnny sat down, rolled smokes and relaxed.

"Yuh know, Irish," remarked Shorty. "It's kind of funny—you driftin' in here to clear Hank Farley's name, and cleanin' up a killer outfit thataway. I was thinkin' of Nell, too. I don't know how yuh feel about her, but—well, the coast is clear, Kid."

Irish smiled wearily over his cigarette. "Johnny, you remember that girl—the one you said you thought might have followed me from Dancin' Flats?"

"That pretty little dancer, Irish?"

"Yeah. She caught me a year later in Cheyenne."

"She did? Well!"

"She's Mrs. Delaney. We've got a boy, two years old now. His name is Henry McCune Delaney, and he's a dinger, Johnny."

"I'm a ring-tailed son-of-a-sea-cook! Irish! You named him after me and Hank! You—Irish, yuh're a blasted fool! Riskin' yore life to come down here to—takin' chances like that—and you with a kid—Irish, yuh're a fool!"

"I know it, Johnny. I'm also a Deputy U. S. Marshal, and I go where I'm sent. It was my job, Johnny."

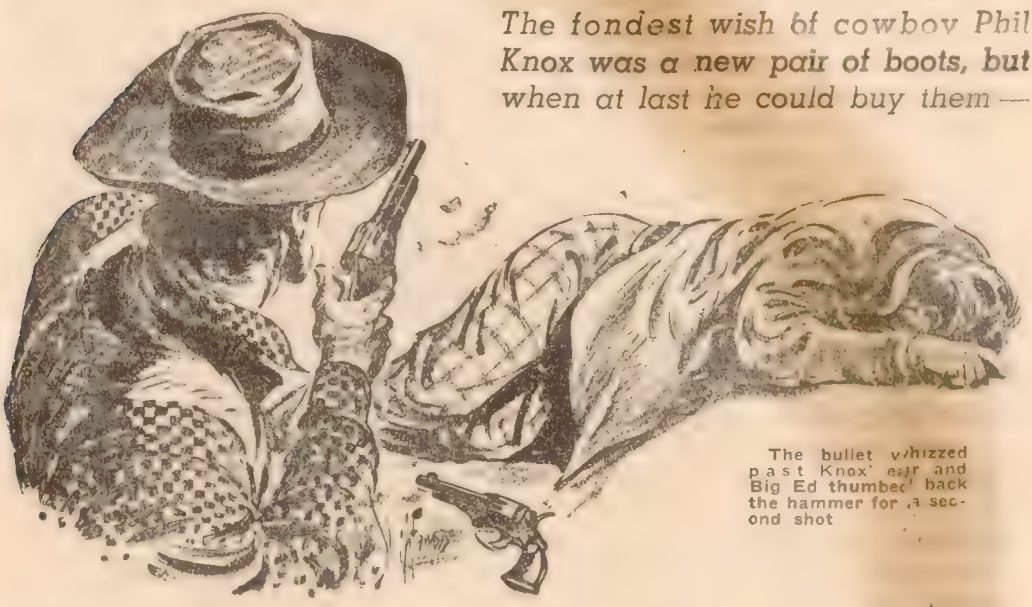
Johnny McCune smiled thoughtfully for several moments. Finally he said quietly:

"I'll betcha Henry McCune Delaney is proud of his dad. I know blamed well, I am."

Boots Make The Rider

GLADWELL RICHARDSON

The fondest wish of cowboy Phil Knox was a new pair of boots, but when at last he could buy them —



The bullet whizzed past Knox' ear and Big Ed thumbed back the hammer for a second shot

TO PHIL KNOX boots were at one and the same time the distinction and the substance of a man. A rider's boots even to the casual eye told many things about him, his standing in the community, his industry and his ability.

Measured by young Knox's own yardstick, he represented the lowest of them all. His boots had already seen their best days when he went to work at the Lazy S L in the spring. Originally he had purchased the boots from a cheap mail-order house. They were straight-sided with flat heels. The uppers consisted of several fragments of leather sewed together instead of being just two pieces, and the spurious word "Justin," still legible on their frayed ears, was an insult to the famous boot makers of Texas.

Knox had worked with the haying crew the summer before and the foreman, taking a liking to the broad-shoul-

dered, heavy-muscled youth, had offered him a job in the spring. Because he was of the land and wanted to be a rider, he'd left his family on lower Squawberry Creek, where farms were irrigated, and turned his hand to being a cowboy.

Of course the crew laughed at his boots. But the boots were all he had and, times being hard on Squawberry Creek, he'd sent his money home. Yet all the while he saved out an occasional two or three dollars.

When he had the price of the boots he needed he would buy them, and that would be a milestone. A day would come, he hoped, when he'd buy new boots, and they'd set him off as being well advanced in his chosen profession.

The time arrived when his closely guarded few dollars were numerous enough to justify a casual visit to "Whitey" Dillman's shop in town, so he asked the foreman for time off and headed for Faywood Station. Before he left the ranch one of the boys had stopped him.

"Big Ed and Lorin Morris are feuding again. Better stick a shootin'-iron in your pocket!" this friend said jokingly, and tossed him an old six-gun.

KNOX tucked the old weapon securely inside the waistband of his trousers, but it hadn't done him a bit of good. Unexpectedly when he needed the gun to protect himself, he hadn't been able to get at it.

Faywood Station was a small town, but it did have a livery barn. When he arrived there about noon, Knox took his horse to the stable, where he dismounted and brought the animal inside. He started through the barn, blinded by coming from the blazing sunlight into the cool dark interior. It was then the man in a narrow stall struck him over the head. He got a second blow as he fell. Though not unconscious, he was nevertheless so near to it that he couldn't recognize his antagonist nor the man with him who helped go through Knox's pockets. One of them got his savings. The other man gave the six-gun brief examination before throwing it aside in disappointment.

"No apple-knocker ever carried one worth a durn!" he sneered disgustedly.

They went out leaving Knox lying on the ground. After awhile he came slowly out of his daze. The knowledge of what actually happened had been with him all the time. His bitterness drummed up so fast he almost overlooked the faint smell of perfume in the air. Yet it remained with him, a sweetish odor such as women were wont to wear. But neither of the sneak thief pair had been a woman. That much was definite.

He forgot about the aroma for the time being. All else except his loss blotted out. He'd saved by depriving himself of necessities for six months only to lose his savings to a pair of skulking thieves. There was no use now to go down to Whitey Dillman's saddle shop.

Retrieving the gun, he blew off the dirt and stuck it slanting back inside the waistband of his levis. A lot of good this piece of iron had done him! He went down toward the front of the stable, arriving just in time to see the barn man come in through the big front doors carrying a package under one arm.

Knox wasn't the talkative kind so he made the encounter brief, not revealing what the loss actually meant to him. The barn man was sympathetic but a robbery of that kind puzzled him.

"We ain't had one like it in years," he declared. "I left here to go to the bar, and that must've been right before you led your horse in. There wasn't nobody around then."

He had a bottle in the package and uncorked it in the corner bunk room where Knox took a drink with him. The

stuff didn't relieve his depressed spirits any. The barn man took another look at his woe-begone expression.

"It's a shame you been robbed," he condoled. "Don't worry about the bill here. You can pay me next time. Here, take a cartwheel for a drink and a meal in town."

Knox thanked him, but wouldn't accept the money. "They missed sixty cents in the pocket where I carry my knife," he explained. "I'll get along."

The dull feeling settled heavier in Knox's stomach. He went out on the street, coming to the shady porch of an old abandoned adobe. Here was a loafers' corner, where three oldsters already were seated on whittled benches at one end. Knox sat down with them and rolled himself a cigarette from a half empty sack.

He was there a long time in gloom. The town consisted of a huddle of buildings, the few business establishments having the usual high false fronts. He looked at them and the ground-up red dirt of the street in sore disillusion. Later in the afternoon two riders came galloping in from the north.

Lorin Morris' big shape bulked in the saddle. Knox caught a glimpse of his freshly shaved craggy face as the riders went by. Morris, owner of the 4X was dressed for an evening in town. He and his man, likely his foreman, drew rein before the Elite Saloon. In this the only dance hall in town, worked a certain young woman he admired. She was the cause of the hatred between him and "Big Ed" Snodgrass.

THE country had been talking about little else for months. It wasn't a pretty story either. Quite the reverse. This painted siren in the Elite was playing them both. Some folks were unkind enough to aver also the rest of the country as well.

The end was going to be sordid and bloody, an eventuality the countryside had been waiting for. There would be a gunfight and one or both of the big men would die. Despite the fact he was a wealthy cattleman, Morris had few sincere adherents. He was a blustering, overbearing man who paid little attention to another man's legal title to property. When he got a chance to run his brand on a hairy hide, he didn't concern himself much about ownership. According to his code any unbranded critter belonged to the first man to find it. Trouble was he rode across his own range line into the grass of his neighbors, looking.

No, folks wouldn't grieve much when Morris got killed. And if it just happened to be Big Ed instead of Morris there would be fewer tears yet. He ran the faro game in the Christmas Night Saloon. When the girl first showed up in the Elite, he had tried to cut her out for himself. Indeed, for awhile he was successful in scaring less hardy men away. Later Morris had come along, taken a couple of looks and gone into the game on his own. He told Big Ed to get out of his way.

Big Ed didn't get. In fact he planted a right fist solidly on Morris' face while the girl, so witnesses reported, stood by giggling. The fight didn't last long because Morris never got cocked after the first lick. From then on, though, the pair maneuvered with each other like two huge mongrel dogs ready to pounce the instant the other turned his back.

The loafers were talking of these things now in sly insinuating manner when they got to the subject of the ill-will between the two men. Knox arose to his feet, sauntering away from them. He moved past the open front of the Elite, hearing Morris' raucous laughter floating out. Knox didn't halt until he got down past the Christmas Night Saloon.

Whitey Dillman's shop occupied a one-room dilapidated adobe building further along the street. Knox had

known, when tragedy overtook him in the barn, he'd be unable to resist coming down here. The shop had been luring him for months. For weeks, all he'd been able to think about during waking hours was that Dillman had the boots he wanted. The boots were now beyond his means for at least another two months. He thought of that, then felt his hopes revive again. Now, with cash crops ripening, his family wouldn't need his financial help for some time. The fact alone cheered him and it helped him manage the balance of the distance to the front of the shop.

The door stood open. He could see the chubby bodied old saddle maker working in the back of the room. There was one show window in front and through the fly specked pane of thick glass Knox saw the boots. Two brown pairs and two black. His eyes went fast to one black pair. It had alligator hide vamps, red rows of stitching and insets of white soft leather in diamonds and hearts. Yes, sir! That was a pair of town going boots! For dress, for Rodeo Day! His eyes lighted up just from the sheer joy of being able to take a look at them.

But these fancy boots were not for work. Reluctantly his gaze turned to the other black pair. They were heavy, expertly tanned steer hide throughout, not fancy, but double and triple stitched with underslung heels. Those were a working man's boots. Hot shakes! Those were a top rider's foot gear. They gave a man dignity and an insouciant feeling of well being. These were the boots that, months ago Knox had made up his mind he was going to own.

There was no customer in the shop. Dillman moseyed up front, spitting a brown wad of well chewed tobacco into the dirt.

He saw Knox and hesitated.

"Come on in out of the heat," he drawled. "Cool off after a bit."

KNOX followed him through the door inside the room smelling richly of cut leather and tannin. Dillman went back to the tree where he resumed work on a saddle. Why not, Knox thought, he could look. Maybe next month for certain he could make a buy and not be taking up Dillman's time after all.

"Looks as though you'll be needin' a pair of boots soon now," Dillman remarked casually. He kept right on stitching the saddle while he talked.

"Kind of had boot buyin' in mind," Knox replied equitably, his glance disinterested.

"Take a look over there," Dillman told him. "I got the best boots for the money anywhere." Knox moved toward the wide shelf against the wall where a collection of boots stood ready for inspection. From the taut thinness of Knox's face Dillman couldn't tell whether this was the cowboy's casual approach to a trade or not.

Dillman's gaze drifted over the worn overalls, down at the heels of the boots Knox wore, and up fast. This cowboy more than needed a pair of boots. Knox's movements were deliberately casual. He examined the boots, but always his mind drifted back to the substantial, thick leather of solid comfortable ones in the window.

Dillman knew with certainty then the cowboy long ago had made up his mind. Still he proved nonchalant about making the deal. Dillman arose to approach the shelf.

"Them's my idea of what a man ought to wear," he offered. "A man's feet would be plumb shod in the rain and the ice and snow of this winter we're going to have after awhile."

Knox listened respectfully, agreeing with a slow nod of his head. But what he thought was next month for certain he'd have to get them.

"I'm goin' to be in town late," he offered. "Guess I'd ought to have a bite to eat."

"Sure, take your time," Dillman answered good-naturedly. "I always say a man needs to consider well two things. Buying a pair of boots and taking a wife!" He laughed indulgently at his own humor as Knox went out to the street.

Knox felt more bitter than ever. Except for the foot-pad robbers in the barn, he could be walking up the street proudly right now. Knox's chest tightened with slow anger, something unusual for him. It galled now, ran through him like acid. He could imagine what he would do if he knew the identity of that pair.

Well, he thought, he might as well get out of town. By riding at a walk it would be very late when he got home to the Lazy S L. The crew wouldn't know that he hadn't spent his whole time in town. He wouldn't have to explain about not buying the boots for he hadn't disclosed to any of them he'd been going short of tobacco and without new underwear solely for the sake of new footwear.

He came abreast of the Elite and decided he might as well have a glass of beer, after which his remaining funds would permit a bowl of red at the chili counter.

Morris was still present, obviously intending to make a night of it. He stood at the lower end of the bar in the center of a small group of loud talking men. Knox slid in against the bar near the front wall. His glance flickered to the bright faced girl on the other side of Morris.

Knox called for a glass of beer, got it and drank slowly while giving his attention to the boisterous cowman. The girl was short, but not heavy despite full hips and well-upholstered bosom. There was something reckless, yet coolly calculating about her. Her prettiness, for she had that, and her pouting lips would appeal irresistibly to some men, men such as Morris and Big Ed especially. To Knox she held no attraction at all.

He had finished his beer and turned to leave when through the swinging half doors came Big Ed. He walked in fast, recognition bringing to a sudden halt all the fun and laughter going on at the other end of the bar. Big Ed planted his polished fancy boots on the floor two steps from Knox. His face was working with emotion, but before he could speak, his shadow, a thin brown faced man, slithered in to join him on the left. This scrawny necked little card dealer had essayed to duplicate Big Ed's immaculate dress, but he couldn't quite make the grade, lacking the looks and the build.

THE crowd fell away from Morris, leaving him facing Big Ed. There came a tinkle of laughter from the girl. Her bright eyes surveyed Big Ed as though he were a complete stranger. It was then an odd aroma was wafted to Knox's nostrils. He hadn't quite identified the odor when Morris spoke.

"I'm being congratulated, Ed," he drawled in loud tones. "Minnie is going to the ranch with me in the mornin'!" His words reeked with malice and held a sort of covetous triumph.

The surprising thing was he spoke to Big Ed at all.

Big Ed's lips quivered, his eyes blazed. He said, "You're even probably silly enough to marry her some day too!"

The insult drove the triumph off Morris' face. It went crimson with wrath. Perhaps only the witnesses caused him to answer at all.

"The marriage takes place at the ranch by the sky pilot tomorrow mornin'," Morris told Big Ed. "To which you ain't invited."

"Maybe that's true," Big Ed drawled.

"No maybe about it!"

"I mean just that. I'll be seein' you

in the middle of the street at sunset, Morris."

He waited when he finished. The balance of the room went still as death. Here had come the showdown at last. The inevitable wind-up. Morris' head went a little higher as a cold smile played over his thick lips.

"Of course," Big Ed continued, "you could fail to show up. Reckon you can save your skin by ridin' out of the country."

Morris rocked on his boot heels, his wooden face wearing a fixed grin now. Heat flowed between the two men. But out of the by play Knox was suddenly panicked. The richly dressed, smooth skinned Big Ed riveted all his attention. From him came the odor of that perfume Knox had smelled up there in the barn. Big Ed was well known for using pomades, face powder and a dash of perfume on the bow of his string tie. That was what gave the fabric there a yellowish discoloration. Too frequent use of it.

"I sure don't like to cause a funeral on my weddin' day," Morris said in a voice shaking with hatred. "Well, Ed, you asked for it!"

He had eagerly accepted the challenge to a gun duel in the street at sundown. Big Ed didn't speak again. He turned, striding out as fast as he entered, his partner closing in behind his back. The room broke into a hub-bub of noise.

"Shucks, loud-mouthed cuss'll be easy meat for me!" Morris bragged. The girl hung tighter to his arm, her face turned up toward him. There wasn't however, any trace of worry in it.

Knox felt worse as he moved out to the street. He had a gun, yet he wasn't in the class with Big Ed or Morris. He could walk up to Big Ed, stick the gun into his middle and demand his money. Big Ed would likely laugh and, when he did Knox could only let go of the hammer.

The small sum of money couldn't have meant anything whatever to Big Ed who threw large amounts around. It must have been only an amusing incident to him. That had been his queer idea of fun, to slap down a lesser man who wasn't doing anyone an iota of harm, just because he could get away with it.

The idea of appealing to the sheriff was out so far as Knox was concerned. The sheriff wouldn't believe it, and Big Ed would merely laugh it off, afterwards telling the story with gusto as a huge joke. Knox, feeling more helpless and brow-beaten than before, went on up the street to the chili joint.

The sun was an hour or so high. One of those two tough gun-slingers would slay the other. Already the buzz of excited talk in anticipation of the forthcoming spectacle buzzed through town. It entered the greasy chili hole in the wall where Knox ate. Men close by speculated hopefully whether two such dangerous men might not kill each other with a single shot apiece.

FEELING certain now that any possibility of his wearing new boots home had gone glimmering, Knox realized he must hang around anyway. Such a gunfight as this one would be discussed and talked over the ranges for many months. A man who actually witnessed it would be expected to relate each detail at the ranch where he worked. An hour wouldn't delay him much anyway. So he took his time in the chili joint, afterwards sauntering down past the Elite.

Red sun dogs were banked on the western horizon now. Probably a bare few minutes more of the day was left. People stood in doorways lining the street above and below the center of the small business district. Knox figured Morris would remain in the Elite, walking from there into the dirt roadway when he met Big Ed. Where would Big Ed show?

It might be from any place along this section. Each would be sure of taking any advantage possible. Knox doubted either man would come from the east side of the street. That would be a good place to watch from. He went over through the ankle deep flour-fine dust to the front of a feed store.

He moved up on the edge of it to get away from a knot of men who talked, low voiced, of the fighting abilities of Big Ed and Morris. One man said the sheriff would probably stop the duel, though not certain such procedure would promote public welfare.

A girl stood near the open door of the store, her straw hatted head turned away from Knox. She held a small dog on a braided leash. By her clothing, she was a town girl, and he recognized her. She was the storekeeper's daughter. Here was the kind of a girl a man had ought to marry when he got around to it instead of one, such as Minnie from the Elite. This girl didn't flirt or flaunt her good looks. All at once Knox's throat got choked and dry because he was looking directly at her and she started to turn her head.

The small brown dog suddenly darted out of the doorway, and into the leash strode Big Ed. He had attempted a trick, after all, by waiting on this side of the street. It was sundown now. Big Ed tried to break his stride and missing, tangled with leash and dog. He saved himself from falling flat only by thrusting his right arm down to the porch floor.

He came up his face livid with anger, his eyes sparking fire.

"Keep that cur out of people's way!" he cried. "If you was a man, I'd beat your face in."

His harshness to a woman told volumes to Knox. Big Ed wasn't so sure of himself. The impending fight worried him.

The girl didn't speak. Her white face was rigid with indignation. She tried to get the whimpering dog against the wall of the store as Knox involuntarily moved nearer. Big Ed shifted his eyes to the dog.

"A dog ain't a woman!" he cried, and kicked the little animal, driving it against the front wall. The dog fell back, yelping loudly.

A white hot streak of anger raced through Knox. But it wasn't the kind he'd experienced in the Elite when he discovered it had been Big Ed who robbed him. He swung around the girl, boring in before Big Ed could turn to meet him. Knox had sized up Big Ed. Behind the blow he uncorked on impulse at the handsome, sleek face lay resentment, contempt and a measure of vengeance for what had been done to him.

The blow landed solidly. It carried with it all of Knox's weight and it hurled Big Ed off his feet, turned him part way around. He landed on hands and knees, the long loose black coat flew up, exposing the seat of his pants. While the few spectators close at hand gaped in amazement, Knox took a step forward and landed the thin sole of his right boot.

BIG ED rolled over the edge of the porch into the fine dust. He came up bellowing, dirt marking his coat, his trousers and the once-starched white shirt. Laughter echoed along the street. Dozens of people waiting for the gun fight had seen this humiliation of Big Ed.

When he got solid on his pins, Big Ed's blazing eyes fixed on Knox. One hand went to his gun. Something of the old panic returned to Knox. He'd never used a gun on a man before and didn't know what to do here. Maybe not much. He just wouldn't run, that was all.

But Big Ed thought of something else. His rage calmed when he remembered. He muttered that he would take

care of Knox a little later.

"You'd better fork your horse and get out of town," a storekeeper told Knox. Like everybody else, he believed Big Ed would kill the cowboy. Otherwise Big Ed would never regain the prestige he had lost.

A different kind of hush flowed along the street now. Noticing its import Knox moved behind the porch post. A few feet beyond him Big Ed turned to face Morris, who had come out of the Elite and was coming down the center of the street.

Knox glimpsed the blur of a woman's dress among the men crowding the porch of the Elite. Minnie had come out to watch. Knox realized suddenly there was something wrong.

Across in the dusk he saw the scrawny necked gambler, hidden from Morris' view because he crouched against the lower corner of the Christmas Night saloon. With his gun out, the gambler was waiting while the gunfighters approached each other. Since all were watching the two men, none suspected the little man would guarantee Morris never walked out of this fight.

Big Ed and Morris deliberately moved closer. Big Ed thrust his feet apart and stood solid. Morris halted simultaneously. There was a tense pause, a breathless moment before their right hands struck.

Big Ed wasn't confused as he had been a few moments ago. He was hard like steel and he was proving the old adage that the gunman who made certain of his first shot usually won. Morris wasn't the least scared or over confident either. He just made the mistake of hurrying his shot. It went wild. But Big Ed didn't miss.

He stood quite motionless a few seconds. Morris lost his gun in the dirt, his left hand going up to his chest. He pivoted slowly around on wobbly feet, a magnificent figure of a man but mortally injured, and dropped asprawl in the dirt. The woman who screamed then wasn't Minnie on the porch of the Elite.

Big Ed continued to stand there. A low sigh went up as men hurried out. Most of them went to see that Morris was dead yet a few of them crowded up to Big Ed, among them the gambler who had come out of concealment.

Whitey Dillman stood in the door of his shop. Knox thought he would go over there and speak to Dillman. He'd stepped down off the porch before realizing this might be a bad move.

It was.

Big Ed swung around to face him, only a short away, among the small knot of men. He still had his gun out, holding it loosely against his hip.

"Stop right there, apple-knocker!" he called. "You can come here and lick my boots or die in yore tracks. Choose!"

THE buzz along the street lapsed into abrupt silence. Knox could feel the throb of blood in his head. He fought and stilled a sudden panic such as he'd known in the Elite. Big Ed was ready for trouble and he would fire in another moment. A calmness Knox never before experienced came to him as he faced death here. He didn't have much of a chance. He remembered among all the other things that flashed through his mind what he'd often heard from men who had been in similar situations. Don't hurry, he told himself. Maybe you've got a chance for one shot. Maybe.

Big Ed, as he'd discovered on the store porch, could be upset. If that happened, if he lost his temper again, his first shot might go astray.

"Found out I recognized you and your snaky partner, huh?" Knox called out evenly with a bravado he didn't feel. "Sneak thievery, knockin' a man cold from hidin' and then robbin' him is about yore style. I shouldn't have been overly surprised that you and yore

pardner robbed me, there in the barn."

The words stopped Big Ed. They obviously rattled him for his quick anger blazed up. Plenty of people heard the accusation of robbery. It cheapened Big Ed and he might never be able to erase the impression, even if he did kill this cowboy. Indeed, if he did kill him, he might find himself in real trouble for the first time in his bloody career.

He went blind to all else, as he shouted curses at Knox. Simultaneously he lifted his weapon and fired. The bullet whipped past Knox's right ear. Big Ed was thumbing his gun hammer back for the second shot, when a bullet from the old gun his partner had thrown away as worthless, smashed into his head, an inch above the tip of his nose. Big Ed dropped in a heap.

The concussions of the two shots were dying before those nearest to danger broke from their paralyzed stance. But they didn't rush far. Big Ed's astonished partner stood rooted. He couldn't believe it, and he hesitated too long about taking up where Big Ed left off.

A party of riders burst into view from a side street. Among them was the sheriff, who dashed up with two of his deputies. "What goes on here?" he demanded, looking at Knox, as he dismounted slowly.

While he was being told, Knox thrust the gun back inside his waistband and stood alertly near Big Ed's body, his eyes on the dazed gambler.

"What about this argument of yours with Big Ed?" the sheriff asked Knox, at last.

Knox didn't reply right away. The little gambler was now looking about for a hole to crawl into.

"That short feller there and Big Ed knocked me down and robbed me in the barn," Knox said, not removing his eyes from the scrawny gambler.

"Drop that gun, you!" the sheriff roared at the gambler, his mustache jerking on his bronzed lip.

The little man jumped. The drawn gun slipped out of his shaking hands.

"I didn't do it!" the gambler cried. "It was Big Ed. He robbed the cowboy. We went there to see about a rig for tomorrow. Saw this apple—this cowboy come in and Big Ed said it'd be plumb funny to lay him cold. He did it!"

The gambler kept on talking, pleading because he was divided between fear Knox would gun him yet or the law would lock him up. The sheriff bent over Big Ed's body, straightening up with gold and silver coin from Big Ed's pockets.

"Here," the sheriff said kindly to Knox. "Take whatever you got coming from this."

Knox edged over and picked out the sum of money he'd lost. He turned as the talk began to buzz loudly again. Whitey Dillman still stood leaning in the doorway of his shop, a lighted lamp burning behind him inside.

"What do yuh know about that!" a voice said as Knox approached Dillman. "Good riddance. But the toughest man to kill, a better fighter than either of them rannyhans put the teerome on Big Ed!"

Dillman backed inside the shop, his eyes sparkling. He understood very well why there'd been no boot sale earlier.

"I reckon I've made up my mind about them boots now," Knox said casually.

He picked up the heavy pair, nice substantial boots a working man ought to put his feet into. They spelled ability and industry. Knox figured he'd have hard work this winter on the Lazy S L.

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Next Issue: PERFECT DAZE, AND NO MISTAKE, a Story by Ben Frank

THE WARRIORS OF THE PECOS

BILLY THE KID

Frederick R. Bechdolt

Slaughter, treachery, crime and courage—all played their parts in that broiling, roiling saga, the Lincoln County War!

THE little town of Lincoln, New Mexico, lies drowsing under the pale flanks of the El Capitan Mountains unchanged by time, and low gray adobe buildings are scattered along the road which follows the windings of the cañon bed. You can see the bullet-scars in the walls today, and men who are still hale will tell you how they fought here when the lead was flying thick, how the red light of flames fell on the faces of their comrades, dying grimly with their boots on.

Customs change swiftly, and it is the years that drag. There are those living in firm friendship, calling one another by their first names, who, in those wild days, endured bitter hardship seeking one another's lives. And every one of them still declares from his heart that his was the just cause and that his leader—outlaw or sheriff as the case may be—was in the right.

In the beginning John Chisum claimed all the Pecos Valley from Fort Sumner to the Texas line and held it by force of arms. Two hundred miles of level grasslands lying between low mesas which stretch away to east and west, it offered tempting pasture to

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those Texans who were seeking new ranges during the early seventies.

In those days there was no law beyond the eastern edge of the Staked Plain and he who crossed this lonely land, named the limits of his territory, put his iron on every cow that he found therein, and, in case of dispute, justified himself with revolver or rifle. So the Texans began drifting into Lincoln County, and there was intermittent war.

Lincoln, the county-seat, lay up in the mountains, fifty miles away. To Lincoln came Murphy and Dolan and established a general store. They grew prosperous through hay and beef contracts with the military post at Fort Stanton, gained political power, and John Chisum's enemies flocked to their support. The day came when they got control of the county government.

Now each faction had its own leader who arrogated unto himself the power of the high justice, the middle and the low. It was an era of a "wide loop" and a Winchester, when you raided your neighbor's herd without bothering to alter brands.

Away back in 1873 Murphy & Dolan started in at this sort of thing. There was a Texas outfit over on the Ruidoso, three brothers by the name of Herald with a few hundred head of longhorns, and they were hard men. The storekeepers held a bill against them and made this the excuse for sending a posse of thirty Mexicans under Juan Patrón with a writ of attachment against the cattle. The purpose of that band was to rid the country of the Heralds and get possession of their stock.

BEN HERALD and Dave Warner were sleeping in the ranchhouse when the Mexicans knocked on the door one midnight. They opened to the summons, and half a dozen rifles flamed in their faces. Warner was quick enough on the draw to get his man before he fell dying, but Herald was killed while groping for his gun.

The so-called posse began to round up the cattle, but the other two Herald brothers came down from the hills with a cowboy named Baker and made a fight for their property. Gaining entrance to the adobe house, they stood off the besiegers for a day and a night. Under the cover of darkness Baker, the following evening, hitched up a team. The party broke through the cordon of besiegers, made their way down to the Pecos, where they found a Texas trail outfit resting with their herd above the Bosque Grande. They told their story, and the Texans readily agreed to "throw in with them."

That day a dozen hard-eyed riders traveled up the cañon of the Bonita to Lincoln, and reached the county-seat in the evening. A big *baile* was in progress in one of the long adobe buildings, and the members of that Mexican posse were among the dancers who crowded the earthen floor. The raiders left their horses and slipped in silence to the place. The guitars were strumming blithely when someone saw a man with drawn revolver standing in the open door.

A woman screamed, the music wavered, and the weapon flamed. A heavy report shook the air, and panic reigned as the Texans advanced, with their guns spitting fire. Juan Patrón leaped through a window, leaving four of his comrades in their death agonies. For three days the avenging cowmen hunted him and the other survivors until, when they returned to the Pecos, the list of dead had swelled to eight.

From this time on trouble continued. And he who came into the country soon found himself lined up with one faction or the other. If you happened to fall out with Murphy & Dolan you automatically became a John Chisum man, and if you were one of those who disputed with the old Indian fighter you were under the banner of the Lincoln

JOHN CHISUM

merchants. This was the condition when John S. Tunstall arrived in New Mexico during the summer of 1877.

He was a blocky, ruddy-cheeked English youth on fire for the wild life of cattle-land. He came to Santa Fé with a lackey, a huge array of luggage, a blooded saddle-horse, and letters of credit from a London banking-house. He fell in with Alex MacSwain, a young lawyer, and the two formed a partnership. They journeyed down the Pecos to go into the cattle business, and John Chisum advised them to find a range in the mountains to the west. So Tunstall established himself over on the Rio Feliz with four hundred head of young stuff, and his partner "hung out his shingle" in Lincoln, playing politics against Murphy & Dolan.

Murphy & Dolan prepared to drive young Tunstall and his partner from the country. MacSwain was settling the estate of one Fritz who owed the firm a store bill, and they demanded payment. This the lawyer refused because the distribution was still in the courts. Whereupon the merchants got out an attachment against the MacSwain-Tunstall four hundred head of cattle down on the Rio Feliz and placed the matter in the hands of William Brady, the sheriff, their adherent. How much good faith was back of that writ one must judge for himself.

Sheriff Brady sent George Pepin for a posse to serve the papers. Pepin gathered more than thirty Pecos Valley men. Some of them were ranchers who honestly believed the expedition was being organized against stock-rustlers, sent into the hills by John Chisum to harass his enemies.

There were a few young gun-fighters who did not care what the issue was so long as there was a prospect of burning powder. And there was a third element, a half-dozen fellows who had put in their time rustling stock down along the Mexican line, and had fallen in under the Murphy & Dolan banner some months since. They were Bill

Morton, George Davis, Tom Hill, Frank Baker, Jesse Evans and Shotgun Roberts. Made up of this mixture, the posse started up the Pecos for the Rio Feliz.

That same night a rider spurred his jaded horse across the hills on the last lap of a hard journey from Lincoln, where Alex MacSwain had heard the news. He never pulled up until he reached the ranchhouse by the Feliz.

YOUNG Tunstall listened to his tidings surrounded by a little group of cowboys in the main room. He was a green English tenderfoot, and of his unsophistication what was to follow gave abundant proof.

"You get the horses as soon as it's daylight," he told his foreman, Dick Brewer. "We'll start for Lincoln in the morning."

But Brewer shook his head.

"There are more 'n thirty of 'em," he said, "and they must be near here now. They'd sure catch up to us. Best thing we can do is to stick to the house and stand 'em off till help comes."

"But," young Tunstall cried, "this is a legal matter and my lawyer will look out for my interests. The sheriff—"

"Listen," Brewer interrupted him. "You don't know Lincoln County. That outfit's not going to bother with serving any papers if they can catch us in the open. They're coming to *get* us." The cowboys raised their voices in support of their foreman, but young Tunstall's ruddy cheeks grew brighter red and his jaw set.

"We'll ride to Lincoln and I'll accept service from Sheriff Brady and there won't be any fight." He turned again to Brewer. "Go get the horses."

Dick Brewer went. At dawn they started northward across the hills, a half-dozen of them, riding hard. Tunstall was mounted on his sorrel thoroughbred. They traveled all day, and that evening reached the cañon of the Ruidoso. Brewer glanced back and saw the members of the posse topping the last rise.

There was but one thing to do. They clapped spurs to their horses and raced for the pine timber. But young Tunstall kept his sorrel thoroughbred to the walk. Dick Brewer reined up and called to his employer: "Make a run for it. We'll dodge 'em yet."

The British youth shook his head and said something about the law. Already the horsemen in their rear were drawing near. Brewer left Tunstall and had barely gained the timber when he heard shots down behind him in the cañon bed.

The thirty-odd posse-men surrounded the solitary rider, and six of them rode up to him. They were: Tom Hill, Jesse Evans, Frank Baker, Shotgun Roberts, Bill Morton and George Davis. They shot Tunstall down, killed his blooded horse, and laid his body in the trail beside that of the animal.

There were good men in that posse, enemies of John Chisum who had been fighting against just this sort of thing. Milo Pierce was one of them, and he told Bill Morton:

"If this is what you're up to, I quit right here!" He made good his words by striking off for his home ranch at once. But Pierce and his companions stuck to their own faction through the days that followed just as other reputable men stuck to theirs, in spite of deeds which they found it hard to countenance.

Frank Coe, near whose ranch the murder had taken place, sent a Mexican to Lincoln with Tunstall's body, and on the night before the burial a grim company gathered at the home of Alex MacSwain.

Dick Brewer, the dead man's foreman, was there, with two or three small farmers from over on the Ruidoso who had liked the Englishman, and some of Tunstall's cowboys. The lawyer told them that he purposed to fight this thing right through and bring the

slayers to justice. There is small doubt that he thought that there was a possibility of doing this by legal means.

Which brings us to one of that company who was to be a dark and tragic figure in days to come.

He was a sharp-featured boy of seventeen, a little under medium size, who wore his brown hair to his shoulders and would have been good-looking if it had not been for two buck-teeth. His name was William Bonney, and men who knew him called him "the Kid," which was eventually lengthened to Billy the Kid.

Born in a New York tenement district, he had been reared at Silver City, where he had killed a blacksmith in a dispute. Thence he had wandered through the Southwest, dealing monte in Tucson and Old Mexico, stealing horses from the Apaches—which was accounted a legitimate means of making a living—and generally conducting himself like many another boy who fell into bad company during the Seventies.

He had come into Lincoln County during the previous summer with Frank Baker, Bill Morton, and Jesse Evans, and had shown himself an expert with firearms. Young Tunstall had hired him as a cowboy for twenty-five dollars a month, and save for the Silver City killing, he had no record as a bad man.

THIS young cowhand declared that night that Tunstall was the first employer who had ever dealt fairly with him when it came to paying his wages. He showed the company a list of names he had written down—the ringleaders in the murder—and said he intended to kill them off himself.

But MacSwain, the lawyer, was too wise to go at matters in this direct fashion. He copied the list, and got the local justice of the peace to appoint Dick Brewer a special constable. He swore out warrants on the charge of murder, and Brewer deputized the members of that midnight gathering. Within two days they started out to round up their men.

Eleven of them slipped out of Lincoln under cover of darkness, pressed their horses hard, got new mounts at John Chisum's home ranch on the South Spring, and spurred on southward to the Penasco River, where Bill Morton and Frank Baker were occupying a dugout.

The posse came on their men in the hills one afternoon, and there was a hot race for the dugout. Baker and Morton gained shelter, and what had been a running fight settled down to a siege.

All that night and all the next day the posse lay behind the rocks firing volleys at the mouth of the dugout. At intervals a puff of smoke came from the entrance. Toward evening the pair inside the dugout found their cartridges running low and called for a parley. Dick Brewer crept up and made terms with them. They were to get safe-conduct to the Lincoln jail.

There was some dissatisfaction over this. Billy the Kid voiced a hot protest.

"We could have killed them where we were and now you've tossed away the chance," he said.

The posse struck off for Lincoln and rode hard until they reached the Chisum ranch. From Chisum's they went on to the cañon of the Bonita fifteen miles or so from the valley, and made a detour toward Blackwater Springs.

Now Morton and Baker grew suspicious, fearing the same thing that they had done to young Tunstall. When the party was strung out in the cañon, with Billy the Kid and Charley Bowdre, a young Texan, riding in the lead, one of the prisoners edged close to a posseman named McCloskey and managed to steal his revolver.

McCloskey fell, shot through the throat, while Morton and Baker urged their ponies to a run. Billy the Kid

had his Winchester out and in action before his companions really knew what was taking place. Two long shots at swiftly moving targets, and the buck-toothed youth had begun to make his deadly reputation in Lincoln County.

There are those who maintain to this day that the killing was the result of a prearranged plan. But one fact remains undisputed: Bill Morton and Frank Baker died with more chances for escape than they had ever given young Tunstall. A sheepherder buried their bodies a few days later.

Thereafter the posse struck off into the mountains on the trail of Shotgun Roberts, who was known to be somewhere about the Mescalero Indian reservation near the summit of the range. Frank Coe and his cousin, George, joined the expedition, and the band of thirteen reached the agency at Blazer's Mill one morning along toward noon.

Their man was not there, but they learned that he was expected to ride in during the day. They sat down in the agent's house to dinner, leaving one of their number outside on guard. Before the meal had fairly started the sentry appeared in the door.

"There's a fellow just rode up, well armed, and I heard one of the men down by the corral call him Roberts," he announced.

Dick Brewer nodded to Frank Coe, the Ruidoso farmer, who knew Roberts well.

"Go and see if he's the right man," he said. Coe left, and met Roberts among the adobe buildings.

"Hello, Frank," Roberts cried and greeted him with outstretched hand. "What are you doing here?"

Coe told him briefly and explained that the posse held a warrant for him on the charge of murder.

"Oh, you mean that Englishman? Come along, I've got a Las Cruces newspaper that explains the whole thing." Roberts led the way to an adobe, and was about to enter, when Coe glanced within and saw two rifles standing against the wall.

ROBERTS was a seasoned warrior, who would rather die with his boots on than be taken alive, and Coe realized that this little room, with its array of weapons and its thick adobe walls, would be an admirable place for a man to stand off his enemies. So he balked.

"All right." The other man grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "We'll talk it over out here, then." They did so at considerable length.

"There are thirteen of us, and you'd never have a living show against the bunch," Coe argued. "We'll take you down to Lincoln and you can stand trial there."

But Roberts laughed. "Frank, the Kid and Charley Bowdre are with your posse. If they get me, they'll kill me. I'll not surrender." He was a hard man, this Shotgun Roberts.

Meanwhile Dick Brewer had been getting impatient. Finally he bade four of his possemen go out and make the arrest without more loss of time. Billy the Kid, Charley Bowdre, George Coe, and Tom Middleton picked up their weapons and left. They reached the adobe building in front of which the pair were still arguing, and Charley Bowdre was first to turn the corner. Roberts heard the footsteps and whirled.

"Hands up!" said Charley Bowdre. Before he had finished speaking, both of them "threw down" and fired. Frank Coe leaped aside as the two weapons flashed. It was the only thing for him to do unless he chose to shoot Roberts in the back, which was not his way.

Robert's bullet creased Bowdre's body, cutting his belt in twain. But young Bowdre made a truer shot, and the border cow-thief staggered back through the open door with a leaden

slug in his abdomen. And now the smoke hung thick about the place.

George Coe stepped around the corner, raising his double-barreled shotgun toward his shoulder. The dying man "threw down" again and fired, splintering the weapon's stock and breaking two of Coe's fingers. Then he sank to the floor, but still watching that open door and holding his revolver ready in one hand, he crawled to the bed and dragged the straw tick from it. Placing the mattress against the rear wall, he propped himself up on it and settled down to die with his boots on.

The rest of the posse had come running from the dining room. He could hear their voices as they surrounded the building. Always he watched the door. The powder-smoke was thinning, and objects were showing more plainly through it.

"Get down the hill and take a shot from behind one of those saw-logs," he heard some one say. He waited, clenching his teeth against the weakness that was overmastering him, and he caught sight of Tom Middleton creeping among the logs that strewed the slope. Then he fired his third short, and Middleton fell with a bullet through his lungs.

Frank Coe risked death to crawl down and drag his companion away. He carried the wounded man to a spring above the house and left him there in a deep swoon. The next day Middleton, still living, was found by the the spring. He recovered a few weeks later.

Now the posse debated firing the building, but the agent reminded them that it was government property, and they made up their minds to try another shot through the open door. Dick Brewer took a roundabout course until he found shelter behind one of the saw-logs near the bottom of the hill. He slipped the barrel of his Winchester across his breastwork and slowly raised his head. And Shotgun Roberts got him fairly between the eyes.

Every struggle between men has its vital moment when the turning point is reached. A chance blow in the prize-ring, the arrival of reinforcements on the battlefield, the accidental admission of some slight testimony in a court-room; such things decide large issues. That shot turned the tide of the Lincoln County war.

There has always been a tremendous potency in the nickel-plated star. The wearer has the backing of the law and the whole weight of civilization is behind him when he draws his gun. He owns—and his followers share it with him—what old-time gamblers call the edge. Dick Brewer wore a star. When he died, his authority died with him. Alex MacSwain was never able to get another constable appointed to fill his place.

IT TOOK Shotgun Roberts all that night and a good part of the next day to do his dying. They buried him on the hill above Blazer's Mill. They took their wounded and the body of their dead leader away in an old army ambulance. The agent notified the military authorities at Fort Stanton of what had taken place, and the commanding officer sent a troop of cavalry to hunt down the possemen on the charge that they had violated federal authority by this attempt to serve a warrant. Pursuing soldiers narrowly missed an encounter with the survivors of the battle.

From now on, the twelve who had ridden forth from Lincoln with Dick Brewer were wanted men with warrants for murder out against them; with Sheriff Brady against them; with the United States cavalry against them. Murphy & Dolan now owned the odds.

Outwardly matters continued as before. The Lincoln County war raged as hotly as ever. Raid and reprisal followed one another, turn about.

The twelve warriors on their return from Blazer's Mill chose a new leader.

They picked young William Bonney, known as "Billy the Kid." Those who fought under him will tell you to this day that he possessed rare qualities, and the men who tracked him down in the black period of his outlawry, which followed the Lincoln County war, voice this same judgment.

John Chisum's enemies down in the valley were roused to action now. There was fighting on the flat lands. One night a number of the smaller stockmen surrounded a house where the cattle king was visiting in Roswell. It was their intention to brand him with one of his own irons and earmark him like one of his own steers, and they had the fire going before Chisum's host got wind of what was taking place.

He managed to slip his guest out of the house and mount him on a fleet horse at the last moment, and the old Indian fighter raced away with a dozen pursuers hot on his trail. In Lincoln, Sheriff Brady swore in new deputies. Johnny Riley, who was recruiting men for Murphy & Dolan up in Santa Fé, sent a number of Panhandle warriors down the Pecos. In reviewing events after all these years, it is easy to see that the offensive had passed from the hands of young John S. Tunstall's avengers. They were fighting on the defensive now.

A band of thirty-five gun-fighters, Texans who had hired out under the Murphy & Dolan banner, started from the valley toward Lincoln with the idea of ambushing Billy the Kid and several of his warriors who were in the county seat. They were resting at the Spring Ranch on the Bonita River late in the afternoon.

Frank Coe and his partner Bud Saunders came riding out from John Chisum's ranch, with Chisum's foreman, Frank McNab. They were on their way to Lincoln, and they had no idea of the presence of these enemies. As they were passing the Spring Ranch, the flat report of a rifle sounded among the adobe buildings below the road. Coe's horse fell dead under him.

Now the other two ponies wheeled violently and threw their riders in the dusty road. A second shot came from a bunch of cottonwoods, and Saunders, who was scrambling to his feet, collapsed with a bullet through his body.

McNab turned and ran up the hill toward a narrow cañon but Coe lingered, trying to catch one of the horses.

DUST spurted about his feet, and rifles cracked among the ranch buildings. He let the pony go and struck off for the arroyo where his companion was already vanishing. Bullets were coming thick, and there was a considerable interval of open ground to cross. Coe saw a sink-hole from last summer's rains and plunged into it.

McNab had found a cluster of boulders near the mouth of the gulch and dropped behind them. The men from Texas crept up the hill on either side and rained bullets down upon him. He stood them off for something like half an hour with his six-shooter before one of them got him through the heart.

Coe crouched in his sink-hole fighting it out with Bob Ollinger, who lay behind a rock on the hillside below him. The two men knew each other well and had often practised pistol-shooting together. They took it slowly, using plenty of care not to show themselves before they fired.

Once Ollinger raised his head a little farther than usual, and Coe's bullet passed through his hat. They had exchanged five shots apiece when a fifteen-year-old boy who had come up from the ranch-house with an old Sharps single-shot buffalo-gun, gained a position directly above the sink-hole, and opened fire. Coe felt what seemed like a rough hand plowing through his hair. His hat fell at his feet with a big hole in its crown.

WARREN OLLINGER, who had just witnessed McNab's death in the cañon, came to join his brother Bob and got a glimpse of the cornered man.

"Shucks, that's Frank Coe!" he shouted. "Hold up. Don't shoot! Now, Frank, come out, and I'll stay with you. I'll give my word that no one will hurt you. Throw away that six-shooter. That's all I'm asking."

Coe surrendered and the next morning the party rode on to Lincoln, but word of their coming had preceded them, and they found Billy the Kid and his companions entrenched in Alex MacSwain's big adobe house. They took their prisoner to the Murphy & Dolan store and placed Warren Ollinger on guard over him in an upstairs room. Then they went outside to reconnoiter.

The two men looked each other in the eyes when the rest of the party had trooped down the stairs which led on the outside of the building to the ground. Warren Ollinger said nothing, but rose and went into the next room. He came back with a needle-gun and a handful of cartridges. He laid them on the floor.

"Now," said he, "you just look out for yourself, Frank." And with that he went down the stairs.

"Where's the prisoner?" one of the Texans demanded. Warren Ollinger was always slow of speech, and now he spoke even more deliberately than usual.

"Well, sir," he drawled, "I clean forgot him, and I reckon I done forgot, too, and left a gun up there along with him." There was some hard language, and three of the Murphy & Dolan men started up the stairs together, but Coe, who had been listening from a window, opened the door a bit and thrust the barrel of the rifle through the crack.

"First man that comes another step, I'll kill him," he announced. The three fell back and began to talk the matter over out of range.

Just then George Coe, who was with the other faction in the MacSwain house, fired at a Murphy & Dolan man who was coming up the main road, and the sound of the shot broke up the conference of the Texans at the foot of the stairs.

They started toward the lawyer's home, and Coe slipped away before they were fairly out of sight. He gained the cover of the brush down by the Rio Bonita and managed to beat them to the house, where his friends welcomed him the more warmly because they had heard that he had been killed the day before.

There was some skirmishing in Lincoln that day, but there were no casualties. The Murphy & Dolan warriors retreated in the evening, leaving their enemies in possession of the town.

A week or so later, it was the first day of April, Billy the Kid did the thing that hastened the end. He sent a man to Sheriff Brady with tidings that a band of Chisum's warriors were riding up the cañon to the county-seat.

Brady took George Hindman and Billy Matthews from Murphy & Dolan's store to gather their forces. As the three were hurrying down the street, Billy the Kid, who was hidden behind the adobe wall of the MacSwain corral with Charley Bowdre and some other men, opened fire on them. The sheriff and Hindman fell dead at the first volley. Matthews fled to a blacksmith shop nearby, where he managed to stand off the murderers until members of his faction who had been attracted by the shooting reached the place.

There was no particular difference between this killing and the ambush that had left Bud Saunders wounded and McNab dead down by the Spring Ranch. War and reprisals—that was the rule. But Brady was the sheriff, and that changed matters. Sentiment was pretty evenly divided in the community, for Murphy & Dolan had their share of enemies, but a sheriff is a sheriff, and,

even in those days, there were men who regarded the statutes as an institution that must be respected.

The deed left a different impression in many quarters from any that had preceded it, and those who had ridden forth in February, armed with warrants to avenge the murder of a friend, found themselves, in April, virtually outlaws.

In the month of May George Pepin, who had led the posse to seize young Tunstall's cattle, was appointed sheriff. He named Marion Turner as one of his deputies and placed him in charge of forty gun-fighters in the Pecos valley, while he himself held down Lincoln with about the same number of warriors. The Chisum faction, who had been rallying in the flat lands, were kept on the run in a series of skirmishes, and the twelve wanted men, who were hanging close together these days, spent a good deal of their time over on the Ruidoso, making an occasional sortie to the county seat. In this manner the time passed until early in July.

BILLY the Kid and his eleven followers slipped down from the mountains to John Chisum's home ranch on the South Spring. The Turner posse learned of their presence and laid siege to the place. But Chisum's house had been built with the idea of standing off Indian raids, and the defenders had small difficulty in holding the building against a series of attacks. Turner withdrew his men to Roswell, five miles up the Pecos, and left a scout or two to watch the neighborhood.

Some days later the twelve fugitives made up their minds to have another try at Lincoln. They left the Chisum ranch at night and rode straight up the Pecos to convey the impression that they were bound for Fort Sumner, but when they had traveled northward for something like twenty miles, they turned westward into the hills and pressed on hard toward the county seat. They did not know that Turner's thirty-five warriors were riding less than twelve hours behind them—until they reached the little town in the cañon bed, and then it was too late.

Sheriff George Pepin met them with a force three times the size of their own, and they took refuge in MacSwain's adobe house. Turner and his horsemen arrived a few hours later.

The twelve men plucked up heart when Martin Chávez, who had been a Murphy & Dolan man in days gone by but had changed his allegiance that summer, appeared with twenty-odd Mexicans, and these allies intrenched themselves behind a stone breastwork on the mountain-side overlooking the town. But that joy was short-lived. A troop of cavalry rode over from Fort Stanton and established themselves before the MacSwain house. They trained a machine-gun on its walls.

During the two days which had elapsed since the arrival of the twelve there had been intermittent skirmishing. Now the commanding officer sent word to MacSwain's house that the next shot from that place would be the signal for his machine-gun to go into action. The fugitives knew that they were in a trap.

During that day their enemies surrounded the place, finding cover under the river bank and behind adjacent buildings, while the cavalry looked on. Marion Turner took eight men from the Murphy & Dolan store and walked up close to the front windows demanding surrender, which demand met profane defiance. Mrs. MacSwain, who had left her home for refuge with a neighbor, visited her husband, and the fighting men withdrew into another room while the lawyer and his wife had their last talk together.

Evening was coming on when Mrs. MacSwain left. The front door closed behind her and was barricaded from the inside. A man appeared from the direction of the street, and she halted

facing him. It was Jack Long, one of Sheriff Pepin's deputies, and he was carrying a bunch of oil-soaked shavings. She pleaded with him not to set fire to her home, and while she begged he edged closer to the front wall.

George Coe stood in the front room lining the sights of his rifle through a loophole in one of the barricaded windows but every time he drew his bead on the deputy, the form of the weeping woman showed between. He waited in silence until she gave up her attempt and started on down the path. Then he pulled the trigger, but Long meantime had come so close that he was able to leap outside the angle at which the weapon could be trained. A moment later the burning bundle was on the roof. In those days they covered their houses with a mixture of brush and adobe, and the heat of summer had long since dried this wattle until it was like tinder. The flames shot up, casting a wavering red light about the place.

Dusk deepened to darkness. Outside the area of radiance the blue-black night of New Mexico hid everything. The thin orange flame of a rifle cut the gloom down by the river bed. A bullet spatted on the adobe wall. Several shots followed, and the rooms were shaken with the heavy explosions of Winchesters answering through the loopholed windows.

"They done got us in a tight place this time," said Charley Bowdre. "Reckon they're going to smoke us out." The yellow fumes were filling the front room now. At patch of blazing wattle fell among the men. They hurried back into the next apartment.

Tom O'Phalliard, a tall lanky young Texan who had thus far been entrusted with an old Sharps rifle and had been given the task of holding the horses when the others were fighting, had got a Winchester and was making the best of his weapon at one of the windows. An ember fell on his shirt-sleeve. He slapped it out and grinned at Billy the Kid. He was getting into action at last. Some one cursed the cavalry for interfering.

"Only for them we'd have made a running fight, and the Mexicans could've throwed in with us," he growled.

THE smoke thickened. They dropped back into the kitchen. At ten o'clock Frank Coe called from a window that the besiegers were closing in.

"Coming up from the brush down by the river," he announced. "They're going to make a rush." Before he finished the charge had begun. They waited until the foremost of their enemies were within a few yards. Then they flung open the rear door, and it was every man for himself and the brush down by the river for their goal.

Bob Beckwith, a Seven Rivers cattleman, was in the lead of the advancing party. Billy the Kid got him between the eyes, and he fell before the doorway. The bullets were buzzing thick, kicking up little spurts of dust among the fleeing men. Tom O'Phalliard stopped to pick up Harvey Morris, who had stumbled and fallen ahead of him.

"No use, Tom," Charley Bowdre called. "He's dead."

O'Phalliard looked into Morris's face and let the body gently down before he ran on. He was getting all the action he wanted now. Three Mexicans from over on the Ruidoso, who had been members of the Blazer's Mill posse, fell between the house and the thickets down by the Bonita.

Alex MacSwain was the last man to leave his blazing home. Perhaps it was because he was thinking of young Tunstall, or perhaps it was because he was no warrior and meant to keep to his rôle as a lawyer. At any rate, he came forth at a slow walk. A bullet halted him. He stopped, bowed his head, and pitched forward dead.

Five dead and several wounded were

what the survivors found when they rendezvoused on the hillside above the town that night.

There remains but one brief scene to this tragedy of the Old West. It was enacted in the month of August when Governor Lew Wallace came to the little town of Lincoln and held a midnight conference with this group of men whom the law wanted on the charge of murder.

"Go and stand trial," he bade them. "If the court convicts you, you will then come into my hands. You have my word that I will give you justice."

Here came the parting of the ways. The farmers of the Ruidoso, who had gone into this thing seeking to arrest Tunstall's slayers, accepted the offer, and the courts freed them a few months later. But Billy the Kid, with whom the author of "Ben Hur" talked at great length that night in Lincoln, refused to trust himself to courts of law. He argued that, after what had come and gone, his only safety lay with his weapons, and he did not propose to give them up to any man.

So he rode away, and with him rode Charley Bowdre, Tom O'Phalliard, and John Middleton. A year or so later the last-named left him up in the Panhandle and became a law-abiding citizen. But Bowdre and O'Phalliard stuck to him through the dark days of his outlawry until they died, as he died in his turn, from the bullets of those who hunted them.

Headliners in the Next Issue!

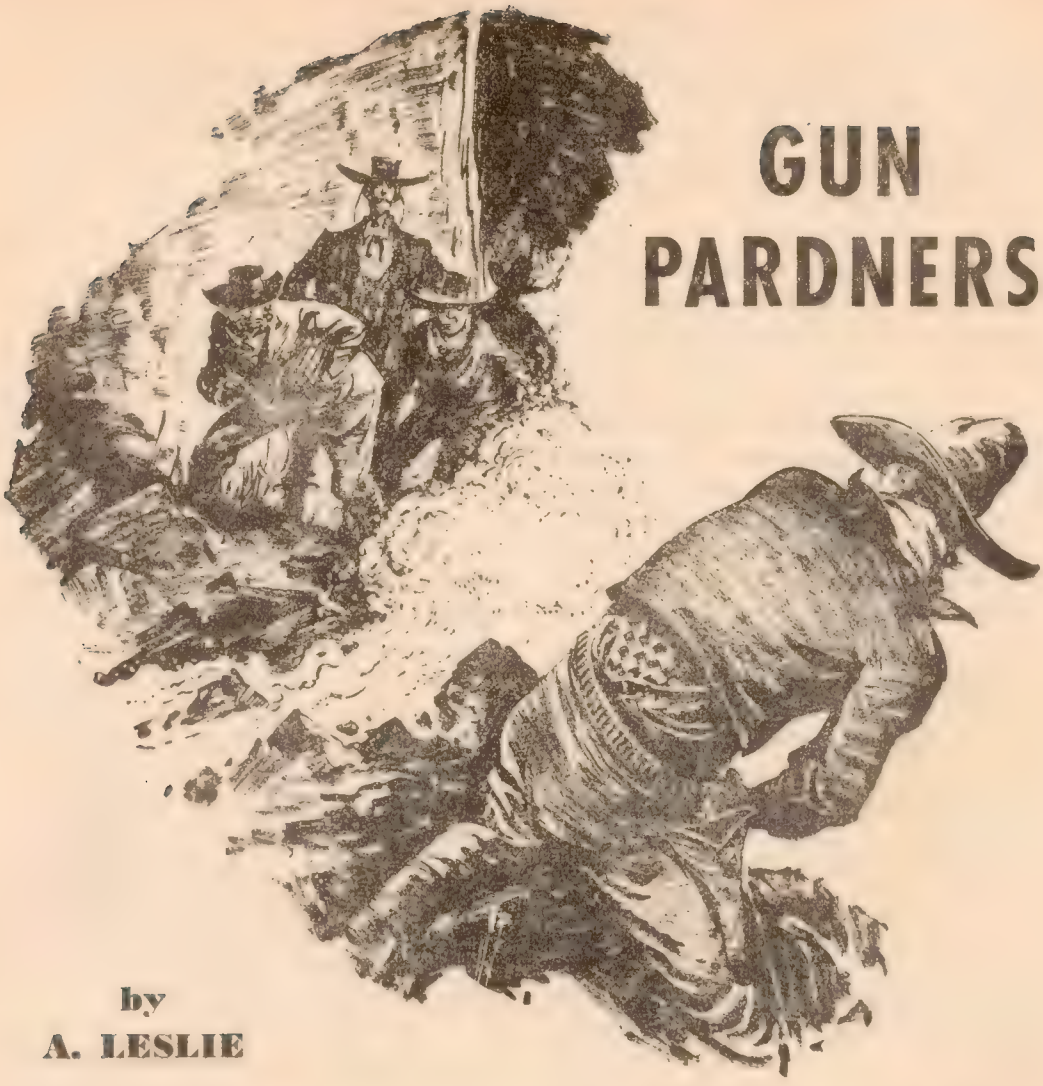
GALLOPING into the spotlight next issue is SHOWDOWN TRAIL, the smashing complete book-length novel of fighting wagon train pioneers by Jim Mayo. It's the two-fisted saga of Rock Bannon, who joins an outfit that seems headed for disaster—and pits himself against an ugly crew of scheming villains who have hoodwinked a group of pioneers. SHOWDOWN TRAIL is a novel of adventure and conflict that you will long remember!

INDIAN-FIGHTING days are vividly brought back in RIFLES FOR THE APACHES, a long novelet by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson in which the hero, Lieutenant Rowan of the U. S. Cavalry, combats raiding Apaches and renegade whites in order to stave off a fearsome massacre. Authentic in its historical background, colorful in its delineation of character, RIFLES FOR THE APACHES will prove a memorable reading experience.

AMONG the short stories next issue is PERFECT DAZE, AND NO MISTAKE, a rollicking yarn in which you'll continue the amusing adventures of the characters you'll find in the story FATE, AND NO MISTAKE, by the same author, which appears in this issue. If you read this month's Boo Boo Bounce story you'll know what to expect—and you'll be eagerly awaiting the next Ben Frank yarn in this sequence.

NEXT in our series of true stories of the West is THE WARRIORS OF THE CANADIAN, by Frederick R. Bechdolt, famous writer and historian, whose account of THE WARRIORS OF THE PECOS appears this issue. These notable true stories mirror the Old West in all its shimmering reality!

THE next issue will also contain, in addition to the above headliners, many other stories of outstanding merit plus another chat with the Ramrod in THE TALLY BOOK. Another 196-page issue packed with swell reading!



GUN PARDNERS

by
A. LESLIE

Old John Arbuckle wanted the whole valley, and he was tighter'n tree bark—but Clem Yates and Jim Hayes sure fixed that!

OLD CLEM YATES gazed out the window of his little ranchhouse set on a slight rise and surrounded by a grove of ancient oaks. It was a good ranchhouse, built many years before Clem acquired the Lazy Y. And the Lazy Y was a good cattle spread. A stranger riding over it would have been impressed by the excellent stand of grass, the sufficiency of water, the cool canyons that provided shelter from sun and storms.

He would have noted but one discrepancy. There were practically no cows on the Lazy Y, and cows are rather necessary to the successful conducting of a spread.

The previous winter had been one of

the worst the Texas Panhandle had ever known. When spring finally arrived, the tenderest, greenest spring Texas ever experienced, many, almost a majority, of the small spread owners in the Panhandle were ruined.

The rangeland was dotted with the withered carcasses and the bones of dead cattle. Blizzard after blizzard, unprecedented low temperatures, freezes that held on and on, such had been the preceding winter.

Old Clem Yates was one of many who found himself "land poor." His neighbor to the south, young Jim Hayes, was little better off. And Jim had a mortgage to worry about. Clem turned from the window and grinned across the table at tall, bronzed Jim Hayes, who had dropped in for a pow-wow.

"I was over in Sunset Valley yesterday," Clem said. "Tom Withrow over there wants to sell his herd. Hankers to go back to Kentucky. Sure wish I could buy them cows. Put me back in tip-top shape."

"How much does he want?" asked Hayes.

"He'll let 'em go for five thousand," Yates replied. "Might as well be five million, to me. By the way, Jim, how did yuh make out with your visit to the bank?"

Jim Hayes shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Raines, the president, was nice to me," he replied, "but I'm scairt bein' nice won't help overmuch. I'll manage through the summer, I reckon, but by next spring I figger Raines will be in the cow business again."

"Again is right," grunted Yates. "That's the trouble—the bank is plumb overloaded with cow land. Money's tight right now. Raines is all right, but he has to fulfill obligations to his stockholders."

"That's so," Hayes agreed.

"Your note is six thousand, isn't it?" Yates asked.

HAYES nodded, gazing out the window toward the gray ribbon of trail winding a few hundred yards below the ranchhouse. His black brows drew together at sight of a rider passing.

The rider was a tall man, lanky, angular, though broad-shouldered. His long and scrawny neck rose out of a very low collar. He was garbed in rusty black, with pantaloon straps run under old-fashioned congress gaiters. His long black coat flapped in the breeze, revealing a cartridge belt and a heavy gun. His wide black hat rested on a large head scantily covered with hair. He had a lined, cadaverous face with close-set beady eyes, a great beak of a nose and a hard mouth. His shaven chin was long and blue. It was a capable but certainly not pleasant face.

"There goes John Arbuckle," observed Hayes. "Sort of lookin' things over like a cat what sees the door to the canary's cage open. Did yuh ever stop to think, Clem, that aside from your place and mine and that pile of rocks up to the head of the valley, the old Bledsoe spread, Arbuckle just about owns the whole valley, now?"

"He's sure been buyin' up durin' the past coupla years," conceded Yates, his eyes following the stringy figure atop the fine roan horse. "Yes, I've a notion John would like to have this whole valley."

"He won't get it," Hayes prophesied grimly. "I know how yuh feel about him. Aside from that fat son of his, I figger he's about the orneriest sidewinder in this whole section."

Old Clem nodded, watching John Arbuckle out of sight. Jim Hayes rose, smiling, touched his friend's shoulder affectionately.

"Be seein' yuh," he said. "Got a little chore I want to do."

Old Clem watched him stride lithely to where his big sorrel was contentedly cropping the grass of the ranchhouse yard.

"Finest young feller in Texas," he told himself.

Hayes mounted, hitched his double cartridge belts a little higher, swung the black butts of his guns a trifle to the front. He waved a hand and rode off. But instead of heading north to his own spread, the Bradded H, he turned south toward Tosca, the cattle and railroad town at the mouth of the valley.

"Don't figger Jim has ever used them old guns of his dad's much, but he packs 'em the same way Weston Hayes did when he was alive—and Wes was the fastest on the draw and the surest shot in northwest Texas," Yates mused.

For some time the old rancher sat smoking thoughtfully. Then abruptly he got up, knocked out his pipe and ambled over to the stable. He saddled a chunky bay and also headed for town.

WHEN he reached Tosca, Jim Hayes hitched his horse and entered the Tosca Bank. A few minutes later he was seated beside the desk of the president, Henry Raines.

"Well, Jim, now what?" the bank president asked kindly.

Jim Hayes grinned. "Want to buy a cattle spread?" he asked.

Raines looked astonished. "You mean your Bradded H?"

"That's right," Hayes nodded.

"But what's the big notion?" Raines asked. "Why do yuh want to sell? You can scratch along all right till next spring. One good season will put yuh on your feet. You know the bank wouldn't push yuh, and I would personally do all I could to help Wes Hayes' son. Wes and me were mighty good friends."

"I might make out, and then again I might not," Hayes replied. "There might be another bad winter, so I've decided to sell, if the bank would care to buy."

Raines tugged his mustache thoughtfully. "We wouldn't have much trouble finding a buyer," he said. "The bank wouldn't be taking much of a risk. Let's see, your mortgage is for six thousand, I believe. How much would you ask, over and above the mortgage?"

"Reckon I could use five thousand sort of handy," Hayes replied.

The banker considered. "I figger it could be managed," he agreed. "I'll talk with the directors. We're having a meeting here at two o'clock. Suppose yuh drop in at four."

THE following day, Jim Hayes rode up to the Lazy Y ranchhouse, groundhitched his horse and entered the house. Old Clem was in the living room, smoking.

"Take a load off your feet," he invited.

Hayes sat down and grinned at old Clem.

"Them Withrow cows over to Sun Valley still for sale?" he asked.

"Why, reckon they are," Clem replied. "Why?"

In answer, Jim Hayes drew a thick packet of banknotes from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"Go buy 'em. Five thousand was the price, I believe yuh said."

Old Clem stared, his eyes widening. "Wh-where did yuh get the money?" he finally asked.

"Well," Hayes explained, "I figgered I'd be liable to lose my spread next spring anyhow, so I sold out to the Tosca Bank. Got enough to take care of that herd for yuh, Uncle Clem."

Old Clem stared at the young cowboy, his eyes a trifle misty. He started to speak, gulped, then leaned back in his chair and roared with laughter.

It was Jim Hayes' turn to stare.

"What in blazes is so funny?" he demanded as Yates continued to howl with mirth.

Old Clem wiped the tears from his eyes, chuckled, reached into his pocket. He drew forth a second thick packet of

bank notes and laid it beside the one on the table.

"I did better'n you," he grinned. "I got seven thousand—six to pay off the mortgage on your spread, and another thousand for runnin' expenses."

"What!" bawled Hayes. "Yuh sold your spread? Who to?"

"John Arbuckle has been wantin' to buy me out for quite a spell," Yates returned.

JIM HAYES half rose from his chair, an angry light in his gray eyes. Then the humor of the whole thing hit him, too, and he in turn bellowed laughter.

"This is one for the brandin' book," he gasped. "I sell my spread to get you cows to stock yours with. You sell yours to keep me from losin' mine! You can buy the cows, and haven't got any place to put 'em. I could lift the mortgage from my spread, only I haven't got the spread any more!"

"Well," chuckled Yates, "between us we got twelve thousand dollars. What we goin' to do with it? There's a first rate poker game down to the Last Chance saloon in Tosca. Mebbe we can bust the bank."

"A heap more likely to go bust ourselves," Hayes smiled. Abruptly he was grave.

"Uncle Clem," he said, "all of a sudden I got a notion. I figger I can get water on that land. I'm just about sure for certain about it. Yuh know, Uncle Clem, I had a coupla years in engineering college before Dad got cashed in all of a sudden. I learned considerable about geology durin' those two years, and about petrology, the science of rocks.

"The formations up on the Bledsoe ranch interested me, and I gave them a pretty thorough goin' over one day when I was ridin' up that way. I sort of arrived at a conclusion about things up there, though at the time it didn't interest me pertickler. Right now it does. Yes, I'm sure for certain I know how to get water, plenty of it.

"We'll keep that under our rainsheds, though, till we dicker for the spread. I've a notion we can get it for your seven thousand, all right, mebbe a mite less. If it had water it would be held at three times that, but as it is nobody wants it, and Bledsoe, who now owns the Clover Leaf over in Sun Valley, will be glad to let it go. Of course, it's a gamble, but I'm willin' to take the chance if you are."

Old Clem said nothing, but a gnarled hand was stretched across the table to the younger man.

As Hayes predicted, the partners had no difficulty securing title to the Circle Box, the old Bledsoe place. Walt Bledsoe was only too glad to sell out for a little less than they were able to offer. Hayes told him frankly that he knew how to get water on the spread, which was their reason for buying.

"Go to it," replied Bledsoe. "If you can do that, yuh're makin' a good buy. I ain't interested one way or the other. I got all I can handle over here with the Clover Leaf. I figger I'm in money by sellin'. I wish you fellers all the luck in the world."

Then the herd of cows was bought from Withrow, who readily agreed to hold them until called for.

"And now for the big gamble," said Jim Hayes. "If I'm right, we're sittin' pretty. If I'm wrong, we got a herd of cows and no place to put them."

When the word got around that Hayes and Yates had bought the Bledsoe "pile of rocks," the general consensus of opinion was that the pair were plumb loco. Old John Arbuckle chuckled creakily as he acquired Hayes' Bradded H from the bank. Arbuckle licked his thin lips and rubbed his bony hands together complacently as he contemplated the fact that he now owned the entire Tosca Valley, except the Bledsoe place, which he wouldn't have as a gift.

Young John, his squat, pig-faced son, sneered openly when anyone mentioned Yates or Hayes. In the Last Chance saloon, he couldn't resist twitting old Clem who had dropped in for a drink.

"Loco old coot," said young John, leering at the old rancher. "Yuh ain't got the sense of—"

THE sentence ended in a yelp of pain as a slender, bronzed hand suddenly clamped on his shoulder from behind and twisted him around as if he were on a pivot. "Suppose," smiled Jim Hayes, "yuh say what you got to say to me."

The grip of Jim Hayes' hand was no light thing. It hurt young John's shoulder, but it hurt his self esteem even more, as folks standing nearby chuckled with amusement.

"I'll say it to you!" he snarled, rubbing his injured member. "Yuh're loco, too, and yuh'll end up what yuh ought to be—a damn range tramp."

"I got an answer for that one," Hayes remarked pleasantly, and slapped young John across the mouth with the flat of his hand.

Young John reeled, his lips bloody. He tripped on a chair leg, fell against a table and took it to the floor with him in an inglorious clatter of smashing glass. He came to his feet spattered with blood and spilled whiskey, let out a roar of rage and rushed, his bullet head ducked low.

John Arbuckle looked fat and soft, but he wasn't. Underneath his outer layer of lard were great slabs of muscle. And he was quick as a cat on his feet. Hayes hit him, left and right, hard, but Arbuckle kept coming. He took a left hook that laid his cheek open to the bone, flung out his long, heavy arms and closed with Hayes.

Backward and forward they wrestled, smashing chairs and tables. They went down together, Arbuckle butting, gouging, kneeing, using every brutal tactic known to a hard and dirty fighter. There was blood on Jim Hayes' face and his mouth was twisted with pain when he finally surged to his feet. Arbuckle also leaped erect, gasping and panting.

And then Jim Hayes proceeded to give Arbuckle such a going over as he had never known in all his vicious life, finally knocking him off his feet with a straight right to the mouth.

Arbuckle floundered over on his face, got slowly to his hands and knees. One hand suddenly streaked down.

"Look out!" somebody yelled. "He's got a gun!"

Jim Hayes' right hand blurred down and up, and two reports crashed as one.

Hayes' shirt sleeve jerked sharply, as if twitched by an urgent hand. John Arbuckle let out a howl of pain and pawed at his blood-spurting right hand. His gun, the lock smashed, spun half way across the room.

Jim Hayes removed the spent shell from his smoking gun and replaced it with a fresh cartridge. He gestured with the barrel of the Colt.

"Now get out, yuh fangin' sidewinder," he told Arbuckle.

Young John went, lurching unsteadily, dripping blood, mouthing threats. Hayes watched him go, holstered his own gun and turned back to the bar. After the uproar of comment and discussion had subsided somewhat, old Clem Yates spoke gravely to his young partner.

"Jim," he said, "yuh got your dad's hand and eye. Be careful how yuh use 'em. A dead man don't make a soft pillow o' nights."

HAYES and Yates rode northward through the early afternoon sunshine. Beside the trail ran Lost Creek, which supplied the valley with the water without which it would have been worthless as rangeland. Lost Creek was a swift, turbulent stream, fairly deep, not overly wide, and clear as crystal.

They passed the Lazy Y, and then,

later, the Bradded H ranchhouse. A few more miles and the trail wound toward a gentle rise that marked the line between the Bradded H and the Circle Box, the old Bledsoe place, now owned by the partners.

At the foot of the rise, Hayes pulled rein and gazed thoughtfully at what was the source of Lost Creek.

From under a tall cliff boiled and spurted a great spring of foaming water, that rolled down the valley to form Lost Creek, upon which the spreads below the Circle Box depended for their existence.

"There's sure a lot of pressure back there under the cliff," Hayes observed. "Which means a big head of water. I got a theory as to how that head is formed. If I'm right, the Circle Box is mighty soon goin' to be a spread worth ownin'."

Less than a week later, a drilling rig was brought in from Colter, the town at the head of Sun Valley, into which the upper end of Tosca Valley entered, its slope reversing above the rise and trending toward Sun Valley. After much study of the terrain, Hayes decided to drill near the ranchhouse.

"Yuh'll notice this is a rock formation right here, a sort of hogback spine," he told Yates. "And the rock is all cracked and busted, and yuh'll notice, too, that there is a depression in the hogback right here, as if some time a long ways back there had been a considerable lowering. I figger that lowering was caused by a fall of rock into a subterranean reservoir right beneath here.

"I figger, too, that this spine is the underground divide of the slope, and that the crik we know as Lost Crik once flowed north instead of south, underground. There are signs over in Sun Valley that a considerable stream of water once came from under the cliffs there and flowed north. Well, here goes to find out."

The drill was set to work. Steadily the steel bit tore its way through the cracked and shattered rock.

"Reckon we'll need a windmill to draw the water, if we hit any," said Yates.

Jim Hayes shook his head. "I figger not," he replied. "Uncle Clem, what I think we'll get will be what's known as an artesian well. If I figger right, there is a concentration of water beneath here, in a sort of hollow. That water is under pressure and will flow out by itself. The dip in the soil beneath these rocks is filled with an underground lake, which is fed by a stream flowing from the north—a stream that once flowed north through Sun Valley, above ground, and is now dammed to the north a little above here.

"It has to force its way over a considerable underground elevation and then rush down hill to the opening under the cliff at the north end of my old Bradded H spread. That's why the water comes out so strong down there. The land over here is a lot lower than the crest of the rise to the south. There used to be a spring on the crest of the rise, which shows the water flows close to the surface there and at a height considerable above the land surface down here.

"If we can tap that compressed water in the reservoir, some of it will come shootin' out the hole we drill and give us plenty to keep our spread goin'. It'll flow north across the spread and enter Sun Valley. A few side ditches and good holes and we'll be all set. Understand?"

"Uh-huh," nodded Yates. "It's plumb plain, the way yuh put it. How deep yuh figger we'll hafta go?"

THE other thought a moment.

"Not overly far, I've a notion," he replied. "I figger we should hit it in less than a week."

"We'd do it sooner," grumbled the foreman of the drilling rig, "if this durn

loose rock didn't keep sluffin' off and cloggin' the bit. Give me good sound rock to drill through any time, rather than busted up stuff like this. Look there! She's wedged again. We'll hafta pry her loose and spoon out."

"Take your time," said Hayes. "We're in no big hurry. And I've a notion we'll hit it good when we do hit it."

They did—almost too good. The rig was chugging along with cheerful monotony when without warning the bit shot downward. Followed a crashing and rumbling deep in the bowels of the earth, and an ominous roaring.

"Look out!" yelled Jim Hayes. "Get in the clear! She's comin' in big!"

The workers fled wildly from the vicinity of the well. The roaring loudened. The bit shot from the bore and high into the air. After it came a jet of water driven with terrific force. Up and up it soared, its crown broke in a feathery spray. Mixed with the water were fragments of rock that thudded to the ground about the bore.

"That hole's gettin' bigger by the second!" bellowed the rig foreman. "She's sluffin' off that loose stuff. Thunder and blazes, look at her spout!"

The bore enlarged swiftly. Soon a column of water thrice the thickness of a man's body was hissing from the well and soaring a good fifty feet into the air. A growing stream went rolling over the prairie toward Sun Valley to the north, cutting itself a channel, tossing and foaming.

For nearly seven hours the well flowed with unabated vigor. Then gradually the pressure eased, until the thick column of water levelled off to a steady height of about ten feet.

Jim Hayes and old Clem solemnly shook hands. Jim's riders, who had come with him to the new spread, said complimentary things about their boss' smartness and their own good judgment in sticking with him.

The rig foreman swore over his damaged equipment, but was quickly mollified when Hayes cheerfully reimbursed him over and above the agreed contract price.

"Well, yuh got your water," he said as he packed up to leave. "Plenty of it. That stream is as big as Lost Crik ever was. Feller, yuh sure raised merry heck down in the ground!"

The foreman did not realize, at the moment, that Hayes had also raised merry heck above ground. But Hayes himself, as he estimated the volume of the flow, had an uneasy premonition. Finally, however, the humor of the situation he had possibly caused occurred to him and he chuckled grimly as he and Yates and their hands prepared to ride to Sun Valley and bring in their herd.

It was well after dark of the second day when the herd was deposited on the Circle Box range. Hayes and Yates, tired out by the long drive, went to bed.

They were up early the following morning, and riding to Tosca at the lower end of the valley. As they topped the rise and headed down the slope toward Lost Creek, old Clem let out a yelp of astonishment.

HE HAD a right to be astonished. There wasn't any Lost Creek at the foot of the rise, only a muddy channel dotted by pools of water and ribboned by a thin trickle that wandered in discouraged fashion over the rocks and rounded boulders.

"Had a notion this happened," Hayes remarked grimly. "Uh-huh, we drained off the reservoir that made a sufficient head to force the water up the underground slope and over into lower Tosca Valley. The flow into the reservoir isn't enough to raise the water to the required height and overcome the flow from our well. The queer formation I spoke of dams the water back and gives our well all the pressure. Lost Crik is done for, unless—"

He broke off, his eyes estimated the

height of the rise and he nodded to himself, smiling slightly.

"Yuh'll notice, Uncle Clem," he said, "the crest of the rise and the slope to the north is on our land."

"Uh-huh," agreed Yates. "What of it?"

Hayes continued to smile, but did not explain.

"Let's amble on to town and see what folks are sayin' down there," he suggested.

"There'll be the deuce to pay down there, and don't you forget it," Yates prophesied gloomily. "Jim, all John Arbuckle's holdin's ain't wuth a rotten cowhide!"

"Mebbe," Hayes replied, still smiling. "But I reckon that's Arbuckle's lookout. He's always looked out for himself, and for nobody else."

There was plenty of excitement in Tosca. The Box Circle artesian well and what it had done to John Arbuckle's holdings in the valley was the chief topic of animated conversation. The general consensus of opinion was "the old skinflint got what's comin' to him for once."

Hayes and Yates were in the Last Chance saloon when Arbuckle himself stormed in. He was the maddest man Jim Hayes had ever seen.

"Yuh blankety-blank-blank thieves!" Arbuckle bellowed, "yuh stole my water! I'll have the law on yuh!"

"Go to it," Hayes replied. "You haven't got a legal leg to stand on. Even the mighty doubtful ground of our diverting a stream won't apply. You couldn't prove that we diverted the crik. Try it, and see how far yuh'll get."

Arbuckle glared at him. His hot anger had cooled into a vindictiveness that set the hard lines of his face even harder.

"Okay," he said at length, "but there's other things than law, as yuh're liable to find out."

He turned on his heel and pounded out, the fingers of his bony hands working convulsively.

Clem Yates scoffed at Arbuckle's threat, but Hayes was inclined to take a more serious view.

"But what could the old horned toad do?" Yates demanded.

"Quite a few things that'll bear watchin'," Hayes replied. "One in pertickler that I'm scairt of. We've got to keep our eyes skun. Arbuckle is just about ruined by this thing and he won't take it layin' down. He'll do somethin'. We've got to be on our toes. There's a good out for him, if he only realized it and had the decency to take it, but he wouldn't—not right now, the way he's on the prod. Let him make his move, and then we'll see."

BUT as the days passed, nothing happened.

"I told yuh," said Yates, "the old hellion knows he's licked."

"Mebbe," conceded Hayes, "but he was over to the Monarch Mine talkin' with some fellers there yesterday. Yuh know he lends money to the miners."

"Uh-huh, and soaks 'em plenty for it, the skinflint," replied Yates. "What of it?"

"A feller owin' more than he can pay is ridin' the edge of the owlhoot trail," Hayes commented.

Two more days passed, and still nothing untoward happened. Jim Hayes went about his ranch chores as usual, but his eyes were heavy from lack of sleep. And then, the third night after Arbuckle's visit to the mine, the sky was overcast, with only the faintest starlight seeping through the veil of cloud. Jim Hayes, leaning against a tree near the bubbling well, in the dark hour before the dawn, slumped with weariness. The night was very still, with only the hiss and splash of water breaking the silence.

And then Hayes heard something else —a faint clicking drawing steadily

nearer. It ceased abruptly and the silence was sharper than before. Fully awake now, Hayes crouched tense and alert. Suddenly he saw solid shadows moving in the gloom near the well. He waited a moment longer, stretched out his arm. There was a tiny scratching, a little glow shielded by Hayes' cupped hands. Then with a crackling roar a sheet of flame shot up from a heap of oil-soaked brush, making the scene bright as day.

The glare revealed four men paralyzed in grotesque positions near the well. One was old John Arbuckle, another was his son. Two others were hard looking individuals in mining garb. One of these held a bundle of greasy looking cylinders in his left hand. A snaky coil of fuse dangled from the bundle.

For a quivering instant the group stood rigid, staring at the flames and the tall form of Jim Hayes outlined in their glare. Then, with a yell of rage and terror, the man who held the bundle went for his gun.

Jim Hayes shot from the hip. The miner reeled back, screaming, a bullet hole through his gun arm. The greasy bundle slid from his hand and fell.

Hayes held his breath as the dynamite thudded to the ground, but instantly his gun barrel lined with the bundle.

"Hold it!" he thundered. "One move and I'll put a slug in those powder ca'tridges! There won't be a grease spot left of any of yuh!"

"Don't shoot!" howled young John. "We give up!"

Behind Hayes was a sound of banging doors and shouting voices. Out of ranchhouse and bunkhouse poured old Clem Yates and the Box Circle cowboys.

"Bring lanterns," Hayes shouted over his shoulder. "Hustle up before the light goes out. I've got the drop on the sidewinders."

The lanterns were immediately forthcoming. The cursing punchers quickly disarmed Arbuckle and his bunch. They stood, a dejected group, in the gathering light of dawn.

"That's what I was scairt he might try to do—blow our well," Hayes said to old Clem.

"But what good would it have done him?" asked Yates. "We'd just have drilled another."

"It wouldn't have done him any good, but it might have done us an awful lot of harm," Hayes replied gravely. "I wouldn't want that formation under the hogback put to any such shock. I've a notion there'd be a good chance it might turn the crik back into its old channel underground and send it into Sun Valley where it used to run. That would have left our land in worse shape than Arbuckle's is right now, or as he figgers it is.

"When I learned he'd been over to the mine talkin' to fellers there, I got bad bothered. Chances are some minin' man would figger out this formation up here and put Arbuckle wise to somethin' he might do. I decided not to take any chances and laid for him here every night since. My hunch was right. Come on, I want to talk to the old shorthorn."

HE STRODE over to the group, Yates following. Arbuckle looked up.

"Reckon yuh aim to put us in jail," he quavered.

Jim Hayes shook his head. "Nope, I don't," he replied. "I don't do things that way, Arbuckle, and I figger yuh've had your lesson. I'm goin' to turn yuh loose. And I'm goin' to tell yuh what I would have told you first off in the beginnin', if yuh hadn't been in such a sod pawin' notion.

"You can get your water back and make your land worth just what it was worth before we drilled. All yuh got to do is cut a channel through the rise to the south of here and turn the flow from the well that way instead of into Sun

Valley where they don't need it. Then we'll all have plenty of water."

"It'll take a sight of money," mumbled Arbuckle.

"Not overly much," Hayes differed, "and you can afford it. It won't count at all against what yuh'll gain. It's no big chore, and Clem and I will give yuh permission to cut the channel on our land."

Old John stared at him. Then suddenly he squared his shoulders and raised his head.

"Hayes," he said, "you fellers are square and decent, and I ain't—or haven't been. I'm goin' to accept your offer, and I'm goin' to be different from now on. I'm goin' to try and be like you fellers—a real hombre. I give yuh my word on it, and if yuh don't mind shakin' hands with me—"

Jim Hayes' answer was to grip the hand that was hesitantly extended. So did Clem Yates.

Old John sighed deeply, and wore the look of a man from whose shoulders a crushing load has been lifted. He turned to his son.

"Come here, John, and eat crow," he said.

Young John glowered, muttered something under his breath and turned sullenly away. The next instant the hard toe of his father's gaiter caught him squarely in the seat of the pants. He shot forward with a howl of pain and sprawled on the ground. He scrambled to hands and knees, offering a tempting target.

Again the gaiter landed, and again young John spraddled out on his face. Yelping and squalling, he scuttled forward on all fours, got to his feet and streaked it for his horse, his father's toe speeding him on his way at every second jump.

Jim Hayes leaned against a convenient tree and laughed until tears ran down his bronzed cheeks. Old Clem surveyed the scene with placid satisfaction.

"Reckon that's what the young hellion has been needin' for a long time," Clem said, adding with a chuckle:

"I figger that for quite a spell he'll eat 'crow,' or anythin' else, standin' up!"

"This Is Free Range—and We're Going Through!"

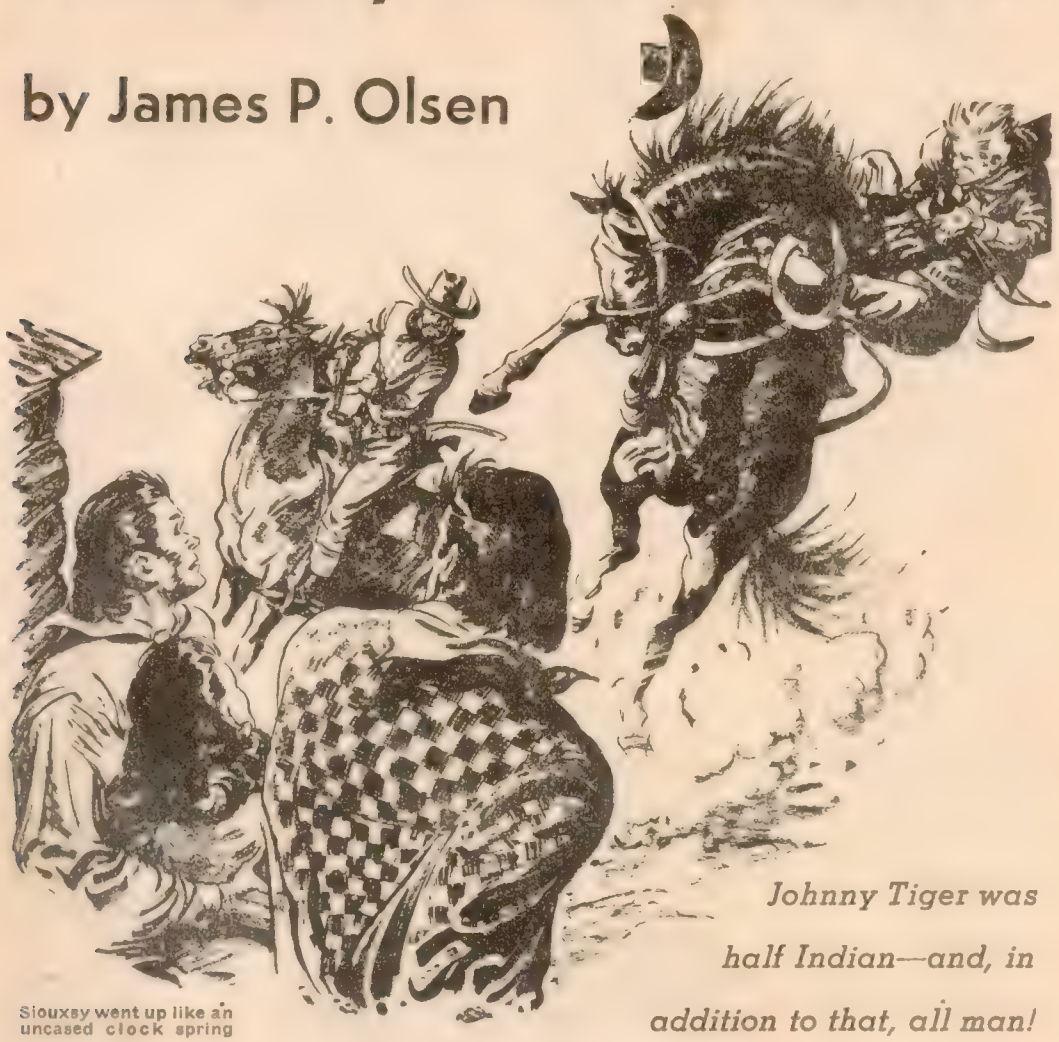
THAT was the verdict of the members of the wagon train—who had been lured by the words of Morton Harper to change their course. They paid no heed to the warnings of Rock Bannon, who urged them to stick to the regular paths. In fact, they were irked by Bannon's lack of cooperation—irked almost to the point of shooting it out with him.

And so the wagon train went on, over unfamiliar terrain, in quest of a settler's paradise—but before they reached their destination, guns were to roar over the range and desperate and bloody battles were to take place!

The entire gripping story of this eventful journey is told in SHOWDOWN TRAIL, by Jim Mayo, the exciting complete book-length novel featured in our next issue. It's a great story of guns and gallantry, treachery and heroism!

KILLER, YOU'RE WRONG

by James P. Olsen



Siouxsy went up like an uncased clock spring

Johnny Tiger was half Indian—and, in addition to that, all man!

SWAGGERING into Paul Cougene's store at Saskat Crossing, on Fiddle River, Karl Dinuba set eyes on Johnny Tiger for the first time. Johnny was sitting on a box while Jeanne, Paul Cougene's daughter, cut his hair, and the sight infuriated Dinuba. His flat nose twitching, a long scar on the left side of his face standing out whitely against his suddenly livid complexion, Karl Dinuba, then and there, resolved to kill Johnny Tiger!

Dinuba hadn't gotten up to Cougene's for a spell. He'd been busy, getting old Jeff Fisher's SF-Connected outfit ready for the Fall beef roundup. But he'd been hearing about Johnny Tiger, who'd recently homesteaded on Fiddle River a few miles above Saskat Crossing. Cowhands, riding to Cougene's for a jug of the good moonshine likker Paul Cougene made and sold, had met Johnny, talked to him, and liked him.

They hadn't aimed to get Johnny in

wrong when they stopped off at SF-Connected to give Karl Dinuba their news. They just wanted to rib the big, tow-head because none of them liked him, and liked less the way he'd laid it out that he aimed to sometime slap his brand on Jeanne Cougene, and would blasted well stand no mavericking in that direction.

So Dinuba knew that Johnny was a quarter-blood Sac and Fox. He knew that Johnny had drifted out of the Indian Nations while just a button, and had roamed considerable before settling down up here in Montana. He'd been told that Jeanne Cougene liked Johnny Tiger a lot, and that Paul had invited him into their living quarters in the back part of the squat log building that housed the store. That bit of news had been bitter medicine for Dinuba, too. Not once, since coming to the Fiddle River range about two years before, had he been invited into the Cougene family circle.

Standing behind a goods-piled table, as yet unseen, Dinuba's mean, milky eyes gleamed wickedly as he studied his intended victim. And it wasn't the somewhat intimate sight before him that strengthened his murderous resolution. There were greater factors involved. Karl Dinuba was forever on the lookout for ways to build up a rep for salty and bad.

EYEING Johnny Tiger hungrily, Dinuba saw that the black-haired young jasper was of medium height and on the slender side. He also noted that Johnny Tiger wasn't packing a six-shooter—which made him just the kind of victim Dinuba liked to use in building to his rep.

Hooking his thumbs over the shell-studded cartridge belt from which his Colt .45 swung in a stingy, quick-draw holster, Dinuba swaggered out from behind the table and over toward Jeanne and young Johnny Tiger. His lips twisting, he sneered, "Why don'tcha braid it, or put it up in curlers? That'd look best on him."

Jeanne stepped back. A small girl with a delightful figure, she had drawn a finely-moulded beauty from her Cree mother and a laughing-eyed, fun-loving nature from her Canadian French father. The fusing of both bloods had filled her with fire, too, that now flamed in her voice as she snapped, "It would, per'aps, look the best on you if your mouth was put in curlers. Sound better, too!"

Dinuba forced a raucous laugh, but his expression darkened. Glaring down at Johnny Tiger, who'd not risen from the box, he demanded, "Well, what about it, homesteader? D'yuh think I'd look an' sound better with my mouth in curlers?"

Wooden-faced, Johnny took the towel from around his neck and stood up. Quietly, he said: "An' with a ring in your nose."

"Ahhrrgg!" Dinuba croaked, the sound one of both anger and joy over the opportunity for violence Johnny's reply presented.

Raising his hands, fingers hooked, Dinuba stepped toward Johnny, only to find himself suddenly confronted by Jeanne Cougene. The scissors with which she'd been cutting Johnny's hair clutched tightly in her small right fist, she was not unlike an enraged lynx kitten. Her dark eyes blazing, she spat, "Yellow pig! At first, your attentions amused me. Then I'm pleased when you kept away men who'd foolishly pestered me. Also it makes me laugh that you think you are a lady-killer and that I favor you. But it is fun no more, and you will leave Johnny Tiger alone and stay away from me!"

"Tiger?" Dinuba's voice shook with rage. "If he'll come out from behind your skirts, I'll show yuh what a civet cat he is. An' the only way he'll git left alone by me is to quit these parts!"

"But, no, Dinuba." Paul Cougene's voice sounded musical and soft, yet with a hint of steel. "H'it is you who leave this store, and be of a scarceness at Saskat Crossing. *Oui*?"

Brushing through the curtained doorway between living quarters and store, Paul Cougene appeared a figure capable of backing up his words. A tall man clad in corduroy breeches and gay plaid shirt, the chill in his eyes belied the smile on his laughter-wrinkled face as he glided gracefully forward.

KARL DINUBA tensed. Then, seeing that Paul Cougene's right hand rested on the horn hilt of the long knife thrust under his red *voyageur* sash, he kept his own paw away from his six-gun. Paul Cougene, in the past, had demonstrated that he could and would use that knife if occasion rose.

"Cougene, what is this?" Dinuba heatedly demanded. "Why're you drynursin' this homesteader?"

Moving out from behind Jeanne, Johnny's voice, like his face, was devoid of expression as he said, "Mister, nobody's got to drynurse me. An' don't get the idea I'm afraid of you. It's just that I got nothin' ag'in you an' can't see no sense in havin' trouble."

"Yuh can't, eh? Well, I can." Dinuba flicked a hot glance at Jeanne. "For one thing, I plain hate your kind."

"For one thing," Paul Cougene interrupted, "you will forget my Jeanne, because soon we make the big dance and eat and tell how my Jeanne, she's marry with Johnny Tiger."

"The devil!" Dinuba exploded. "The devil he'll marry her!"

"*Adieu*, Dinuba," Paul Cougene said meaningly.

"Tiger, I'll ketch yuh when they's no skirt an' knife to pertect yuh," Dinuba snarled, then stalked out of the store.

Shaking his head, Paul Cougene sighed, "Johnny, the six-gun you now keep hang' on your cabin wall, h'I'm think now will be best around your waist."

"Me, I ain't no gunnie." Johnny shook his head. "I've done a goodish hunk of knockin' around, an' mindin' my own business is about all the weapon I've ever needed. I've seen men die when they wouldn't've, if they hadn't been packin' a short-gun."

"Per'aps," Paul Cougene agreed. "But Dinuba, she's the worst kind of enemy—a coward. One man with who Dinuba she is quarrel, is found dead with a bullet through the back.

"But Johnny's right about the six-shooter, Paul *pere*," Jeanne said. "If he carried one, it would give Dinuba excuse for shooting. And besides, we can be married at once, and then Dinuba will see that it is of no use for him to bother us."

"No," Johnny contradicted her decisively. "We won't let Dinuba stampede us, Jeanne. Anyhow, I reckon we'd best not get married till we see what Dinuba aims to do. No sense in riskin' your bein' a widder right off—not that I'm scairt you will be."

Jeanne started to protest, but her father intervened, saying, "A man does what he thinks best, Jeanne. And, after all, it may be we should wait and see if Dinuba she's talk through the hat. Meantime, Johnny, you will at least carry your rifle with you?"

"I won't ride out without my long-gun," Johnny promised.

Taking leave of the Cougenes, Johnny went out to where his coal-black mare, Siouxsy, stood hitched to the breeze before the store. Lifting her head, she nipped playfully at him and, as always, Johnny laughed for the sheer joy of owning her.

Gathering up the reins, Johnny did what a casual observer would have thought an odd thing. He looked carefully around to see if anybody save the Cougene's were in sight before flipping himself into the saddle.

THREE weeks slipped by, then, with no sign of Karl Dinuba at Saskat Crossing or in those foothills of the Medicine Mountains. Johnny Tiger, while not greatly perturbed, nevertheless wondered if Dinuba was too busy with the beef roundup to get around to making trouble, or if he had, after all, just breezed those threats to hear himself blow? He seized the opportunity of answering that question when, one cold, drizzly morning, he rode to Saskat Crossing for supplies and found Paul Cougene preparing to ride down to where the roundup was going on.

"Nine-ten of my cattle have drift, and Bill Eadick, of the Bar BE, has cut them out and sent word to come get them," Cougene told Johnny, adding, "Them blasted ox! They sadden me."

"Reckon I'll ride along an' help you chouse 'em back home," Johnny elected, his casual manner fooling Paul Cougene not at all.

"*Oui*," Cougene agreed. "They are say that travel makes for wiseness, so per'aps the trip she's do you good. *N'est-ce pas*?"

"It is not so," Jeanne declared, but made no further protest when she saw the cigar store Indian expression on Johnny's face.

After three hours of riding they sighted the cook and bed tents of the round up crew, and the growing gather of beef about a mile beyond.

Riding in, between the wet, sagging tents, Johnny dismounted and led Siouxsy back to where Paul Cougene had ground-tied his horse just outside the tied-back flap of the cook tent. Leaving the mare there, Johnny joined Cougene inside, where Bill Eadick, of Bar BE, whiskery old Jeff Fisher, of SF-Connected and a half dozen chilled riders were gathered around a pot of steaming coffee. Greeting them, Johnny was helping himself to a cup of the Arbuckle's when Karl Dinuba rode up in front of the tent.

A quick silence hushed the coffee drinking group, followed by a forced mumble of uneasy talk. Dinuba, armed, whereas others had put aside six-guns so their work would not be hampered, had made his brags about what he aimed to do to the new homesteader on Fiddle River. Now, Dinuba's every movement was an aggressive one.

Dismounting, Dinuba paused and, hands on his hips, looked Siouxsy over. Turning, then, he said, "Tiger, I'll try this crowbait out. If it can pack a real man's weight, I'll take it off your hands. I can use a pack-horse."

"You couldn't throw a pack on Siouxsy, or ride her, Dinuba," Johnny said in that toneless voice that hid the anger seething within him.

"I'll show yuh, yuh breed buzzard!" Dinuba snarled.

"I'm warnin' you not to try gettin' on Siouxsy." Johnny took a couple of steps toward Dinuba. "Don't try 'er, fella, or you're liable to get hurt."

"Threaten me, will yuh?" Dinuba thundered.

Fists swinging, he charged the smaller man.

Johnny stood his ground until Dinuba was almost on top of him. Then, shifting with swift sureness he hooked his right fist to Dinuba's stomach. A gusty breath driven out of him, Dinuba stumbled on past Johnny. Gasping, he turned and caught Johnny Tiger's left and then the right flush on the mouth and, reeling backward, sagged down on his hunkers.

Crouching there on the ground, blood from his smashed lips salty to his taste, the yellow ran up Dinuba's back. Fear knotted his cowardly insides. He sprang to his feet, drew his Colt and slammed a shot at Johnny Tiger!

Felled by the impact of the forty-five slug, his left side shocked numb, Johnny wide-eyed and open-mouthed—tried to get up. He couldn't, and Dinuba, the smoke from his six-gun

hanging low in the damp air, moved backward to the cook-tent entrance. The barrel of his Colt moving from side-to-side, covered the closely grouped, stunned onlookers, and he thumbed back the hammer as Paul Cougene's right hand eased toward the hilt of his knife.

"Ahhh," Bill Eadick gasped. "This's the awfulest thing I ever see. Dinuba, you lowdown, cowardly, murderin' son, you can't shoot an unarmed man an' get by with it! When we get our claws on you, we'll string you from the first good tree."

"But first," Paul Cougene croaked, "h'I'm cut out his heart verrr-reee slooo-leee, and stuff it in his mouth!"

"Nobody ain't doin' nothin' to me," Dinuba rasped. "Don't move—none of you. I'm shootin' the first one that does."

Moving backward out of the tent, Dinuba reached for Siouxsy's trailing reins and a sudden odd gleam of hope shone in Paul Cougene's eyes. It faded, however, when the mare jerked her head high and sidled away from Dinuba. Cursing, he reached over and, catching up Cougene's horse, swung into the saddle, dug in his spurs and raced off toward Medicine Mountains.

There was a scramble, then, as men ran toward the bed tent to get their rifles and six-guns. Bill Eadick shouted orders and sent four riders high-tailing after the man, but without much hope they'd run him down before he lost himself in the mountains.

As he dropped to his knees beside Johnny Tiger, there were tears in the eyes of sentimental Paul Cougene. Pulling back Johnny's canvas coat and blood-wet shirt to reveal a ragged, bullet furrow through which two broken ribs showed sickeningly, Paul Cougene croaked, "Johnny, h'I'm tell you that you got to be all right."

"Suh-sure," Johnny gasped, giving Cougene a pain-laced smile.

The cook, with hot water and clean flour-sacking and a jug of hootch from Cougene's own still, knelt on the other side of Johnny, then. As they washed, disinfected and padded the wound, Paul Cougene asked Bill Eadick to bring up the light wagon used to haul supplies to the roundup camp.

"It's closer to Saskat Crossing than to Deer Salt," Cougene said. "There, too, Jeanne can care for him. And we can send a man to Deer Salt for the doctor, and tell the sheriff what is happen here."

IT WAS two weeks before Johnny Tiger, even with Jeanne's loving care, was able to leave the bunk in Paul Cougene's room. Shock and loss of blood had taken heavy toll, and because of his bullet-broken ribs, it was another good two weeks before he could gingerly take to his saddle.

It was on that same day, while Johnny was fixing to ride to his homestead, that the Union Pacific Kid came down out of Booger Run to stock up with moonshine and grub. A white-whiskered old-timer, the Kid scouted the clearing around the store, then rode up, got down and came in.

"Hi-dee, Paul. G'day, Miss Jeanne," he greeted them and then, turning to Johnny, said, "An' I reckon you'll be this-here, now, Jawnny Tiger? Wal, h'lo, an' I hope yuh're pertly. Us cusses up in Booger Run, we heerd 'bout the shootin' a week'r so after thet Karl Dinuba thing come a-tailin' in up there."

"So he is go there?" Paul Cougene growled. "I wondered if he would be let in and stay in the Booger Run."

"Wal, he shore ain't usin' 'round with the gen'ral passel of us," the Kid grunted, "an' the on'y reason he's stayin' there is 'cause he's stayin' off away from us with Carcajou Paite."

"Snakes of a kind!" Paul Cougene spat.

"Stric'ly why Carcajou took Dinuba in," the Kid agreed.

Making his purchases, the Union Pacific Kid went out and tied his filled gunnysack back to the cantle. Hanging his jug of hootch by a strap around his saddlehorn, he paused, seemed to consider, then called back, "I'd look spry was I you two fellers. Carcajou ain't fergit how yuh taken him down, Paul, an' I reckon Dinuba ain't no love for Jawnny Tiger."

Having stuck his nose in that far, the Kid got stiffly into his saddle and took the trail to Booger Run, while Paul Cougene, starting to build a pack for Johnny, began with a box of forty-five cartridges for Johnny's Colt. Meaningly, he held them up to Johnny before putting them down on the counter.

"I'll strap 'er on, soon's I get home," Johnny promised, "an' have it ready an' waitin' for Dinuba to make a move."

"Oh, Johnny," Jeanne cried, "I'm sick of and afraid of this waiting. Besides, Dinuba is an outlaw now, and he will not dare to show his face down here. We'll get married and do our waiting—"

"No," Johnny broke in. "I'll do my waitin' alone. Someway, I can't help feelin' that it won't be a long wait, neither, an' we'll have our weddin' party after, Jeanne. For sure, I promise, because Dinuba's gonna find me ready when we meet up ag'in."

Johnny rode back to his homestead then, and in the restless, impatient days ensuing, he kept his promise to Paul Cougene and carried his old Frontier Colt wherever he went. He put in a lot of practice with it, too—shooting at tin cans set on a stump until his ammunition was nearly exhausted. It was his lack of cartridges, along with the need to exercise Siouxsy and a desire to see Jeanne, that sent him back to Saskat Crossing a week later.

Starting early, Johnny reached the store shortly after gray, late-breaking daylight. Leaving Siouxsy just outside the front door, Johnny went in and found Paul and Jeanne Cougene at breakfast in the kitchen. Jumping up from the table, Jeanne kissed him and said, "Johnny, you're just in time."

Grinning at Paul, Johnny unbuckled his cartridge belt, hung the gear and his Colt from a peg in the wall and chuckled, "Yeah. I planned 'er to be in time to sit an' eat with you."

A harsh voice sounded behind him: "We never planned it, but the grub, along with fresh hosses, will go good just the same!"

Whirling about, Johnny froze in his tracks at the sight of Karl Dinuba standing in the doorway into the store, his cocked six-gun in hand. Giving a little cry of fear, Jeanne dropped the plate she'd taken down for Johnny, and Paul Cougene reached for the knife without which he wouldn't have felt fully dressed. He stopped that motion, however, when the back door was kicked open and, also with a drawn gun fully cocked, Carcajou Paite stepped into the kitchen.

"Go 'head," Paite, a tall, cadaverous looking devil, invited Paul Cougene. "Jus' make a move fer that sticker. No? Then git up an' stand with your han's raised, an' your ugly face ag'in the wall. An' you line up aside him, you high-nosed heifer, along with your Injun lover."

ARMS held high, palms and faces pressed to the wall, the trio lined up. Dinuba, then, moved around behind them while Paite stepped over to the table and scooped up steak and biscuits with his bare hands. Wolfing the food, he washed it down with black coffee, wiped his mouth on his coatsleeve and said, "Dinuba, git a bite while I git us a couple fresh hosses out of the stable. An' shoot the fust one that so much as starts to look around."

"Look." Dinuba backed up to the

table and reached for grub with his free left hand. "Look, Paite, ain'tcha gonna take the ol' boar's knife an' whittle on 'im like you'd planned?"

"With a posse on our tails, I got no time for pleasure. An' don't fergit that with us havin' to ride double since my hoss fell and busted a leg, they won't be far behind," Paite said. "Anyhow," he added, "they'll be another day, an' we'll take time to tend to Cougene an' his snooty 'breed gal, too."

"Git us some crowbaits, then," Dinuba agreed.

"Get just one hoss, for yuhse'f, Paite," Dinuba said. "I'll take Tiger's mare."

"Look, Dinuba, I'll pay you to leave that mare here," Johnny offered.

"You offerin' me a plowman's pennies, while me 'n Paite got at least twenty thousan' dollars in our saddle pockets!" Dinuba laughed. "Yeah," he bragged. "Twenty-thousan' we took off the express car when the train stopped for water just above the Deer Salt depot about three o'clock this mornin'."

"Dinuba, you harm Siouxsy an' I'll hound you to hell!"

"Yuh'll go to hell, but yuh won't be houndin' me," Dinuba hooted. "I done shot an' kilt the express messenger on that train, an' I aim to leave yuh dead when I ride away from here. But first you're gonna see me straddle that mare you're so crazy about."

"All right, Dinuba, I got me a hoss," Carcajou Paite called from outside the store. "Run them three out here where we kin keep an eye on 'em while we ride away. An' hurry up."

Hands still held above their heads, Jeanne and Paul Cougene and Johnny Tiger exchanged grave, sidewise glances as Dinuba herded them outside. There was a silent message in those glances, and Johnny found himself praying, "Siouxsy, Siouxsy, I done all I could. The rest is up to you."

Holstering his gun while Paite, mounted, held the drop, Dinuba grabbed Siouxsy's trailing reins. The mare snorted and jerked her head and Dinuba, cursing, struck her velvety muzzle with his fist. Pulling back, Siouxsy bumped Paite's mount and set it to dancing, and Paite snarled, "Blast it, Dinuba, save your fun for later an' let's git goin'."

Holding the mare tightly reined with his left hand on the saddlehorn, Dinuba prepared to mount. Grabbing the stirrup, he thrust his left foot into it and started to swing up, and his world suddenly became a blurred, madly revolving sphere.

To say that Siouxsy uncorked would be gross understatement. She unwound like an uncased clock spring, went up squealing and kicking and came down facing in the opposite direction. Catapulted upward and backward, Dinuba landed on his shoulders yards away and Siouxsy, pitching sideways, knocked Paite's horse to its haunches.

Yelling angrily, fighting to stick his saddle, there was a moment when Paite's gun didn't cover the three captives. In that instant, Paul Cougene's right hand fell and rose and all his weight went into the throw that drove his knife into Paite's heart!

Carcajou Paite's angry yelling ended in a horrible, mewing gurgle. As Paite plunged out of the saddle, his six-gun flew out of his hand and skidded on the ground in front of Johnny, and the sight of the weapon snapped Johnny into action.

Running forward he scooped up the six-gun just as Dinuba, rolling over and getting up on one knee, dragged out his Colt and cut loose at him.

Wincing instinctively as a slug whipped past his right ear, Johnny thumbed back the hammer of Paite's gun, then let it fall. With the sound of the shot came Dinuba's scream as the impact of the bullet that broke his collar-bone jerked him half-way around

and flattened him. Less in pain than mortal fear, Dinuba continued to beller and bawl while Johnny Tiger and Paul Cougene carried him into the store and layed him out on a counter.

KARL DINUBA, for all his cowardly squawking, wasn't going to die from Johnny's slug, though. Sam Mack, the Deer Salt sheriff who rode in with his posse a little later, expressed it best. Turning away from Dinuba in disgust, the sheriff said, "He'll keep till I spring the trap from under him for killing the express messenger."

Getting out his makings, the lawman built a smoke, and said, "Cougene, I'll want to borrow your wagon to haul Dinuba into town. You can get it when you and Tiger come in to see about the rewards on Dinuba and Carcajou Paite —which carcass I'll also haul away."

"That mare, Siouxsy, to her the reward is due," Paul Cougene declared. "She, he is save our lives and make possible what happen."

"Yeah." Sam Mack nodded. "According to what you told me, Siouxsy's due a lot of apples and sugar. I'd sure like to know how you trained her to blow up under any rider but yourself."

"Well, it's been a sort of secret, sheriff," Johnny said. "That's why I never let nobody see me get on or off Siouxsy if I could help it. Y'see, that secret was a kind of insurance ag'in her bein' stole."

"Secret? Insurance?" The sheriff shook his head.

"Uh-huh. Siouxsy, y'see, was broke by Indians in the Dakotas. A horse-thief, startin' to get away with her, would naturally try to mount her from the usual, left-hand side. An' Siouxsy, bein' Indian broke, has got to be climbed—"

"—from the right side!" Sam Mack blurted.

"Yeah, the right side's right an' Dinuba was wrong," Johnny agreed, and ignored Karl Dinuba's cursing as posse members picked him up and carried him out to the wagon.

"And now, by gar," Paul Cougene announced when the sheriff had pulled out, "h'I'm bring inside the store them Siouxsy and show him the sugar barrel. Then we call in the fiddler and our friends along the river. We make the big wedding dance and we eat and drink and have fine time. Eh, Johnny? I'm not wrong?"

"That's right, you're not wrong," Johnny Tiger said as he reached for little Jeanne Cougene and drew her into his arms.

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Boo Boo let out a squawk, and there was a great splash

After what's happened, Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce of Coyote County is now a firm believer in the strange and mysterious powers of pure happenstance!

FATE, AND NO MISTAKE

By BEN FRANK

I AM setting in the jail office with my feet on a wastebasket, while Boo Boo Bounce is setting with his feet on the desk, which is how it is when I am but the deputy and he is the sheriff of Coyote County, for if I was the sheriff, I would have my feet on the desk, and no mistake.

I am thinking of this and wishing I had a desk also to put my feet on, when I accidentally say out loud, " 'Tis fate."

Boo Boo kind of wakes up and turns his fat, red face in my direction.

"Hopewell," he says, "what has fate got to do with what?"

"Fate," I say, "has got everything to do with everything!"

"I do not believe in no such silly hogwash!" he says. "I am a man of action and do not set around, waiting for fate to lend a hand."

He doubles his fist and makes as if to

pound the desk, but in order to do this he will have to set up and lean forward. Now, Boo Boo Bounce is no hand to move unless he has to, so he unrolls the fist and twitches his right ear.

"Hopewell," he goes on, "election day is just around the corner, so to speak."

"That," I say, "is fate, and no mistake!"

"Deputy," he says coldly, "let us have no more loose talk about fate. Let us consider the practical. Let us get our heads together and figure out how we might do something what would make us heroes in Coyote County. If we was heroes, Mr. Bundy could not pan us in his paper just before election time."

"The Polecat *News,*" I say with just indignation, "had ought to be set on fire along with Mr. Bundy. Always he is printing something in his paper that does us no good whatsoever. Sometimes I think I will pay up my subscription and quit taking his paper."

"Me, too," Boo Boo says sadly, "only I am six years behind and do not want to pay— Hopewell, ain't that a knock on our door?"

I lower my feet from the basket and go to the door. There stands Pop Pully, who is seventy and has more whiskers than a bass has scales. He is a hunter and a trapper and twice as deaf as a dead mule. He shuffles into the office, and I close the door before I think.

Boo Boo looks at Pop and then looks at me and wrinkles up his fat nose.

"Hopewell," he says, "open the window. Pop has caught hisself another skunk." Then as I head for the window, he adds nasty like, "Maybe it is fate what has made Pop catch a skunk an' then walk into our office?"

NOW, I am not one to belittle fate, for too many times has it stepped into my life for better or worse.

"Boo, Boo," I say, opening the window, "scoff if you wish, but there ain't no doubt in my mind but what fate has got something to do with the way Pop smells. Also—"

"What's that?" Pop says, cupping a hand behind his ear.

Boo Boo draws in a lungful of air, for talking to Pop is something you don't do halfway if you want him to hear you.

"What's on yore mind?" Boo Boo yells at him.

"Find?" Pop says, looking for the spittoon, for he has a sizeable chew of fine-cut in his mouth. "I didn't find nothin'. Somebody has stole my hound dawg, Mint Julep."

Pop spots the spittoon, squares around and lets fly. He hits it dead center, making it ring like a bell.

"Yes, sir," he goes on. "Stole Mint Julep this mornin'!"

"So what?" Boo Boo says.

"No," Pop says, shaking his head, "I don't reckon Sol Watt did it. I seen that Injun, Eagle Beak, sneakin' around. Reckon it was him."

"Why would Eagle Beak steal that hound?" Boo Boo asks.

"You're the sheriff, ain't yuh?" Pop says. "It's up to you to get my dawg back. Best hound in seven states. Fatter'n a butter ball, too."

"Eagle Beak ain't no thief exactly," Boo Boo sighs.

Pop wipes a hand across his eyes. "Yep," he says, "my grief is deep. Best and fattest hound I ever owned."

Boo Boo sighs again and twitches his ear.

"Hopewell," he says, "open that window a trifle more."

I give the window an upward shove and at the same time, look out into the street.

"Fate," I say, "has funny ways of doin'—"

What I see going on in the street leaves me speechless. A tall skinny hombre with a saddle bag under one arm and a six-gun in the other hand is coming out of the Polecat bank lickety split. He heads for a hoss, flings the

bag over the saddlehorn and leaps into the leather. At that moment, old man Lilly sticks his head out the bank door and begins to bellow like a bull with a knot in his tail.

"Boo Boo," I chokes, "somebody has just robbed the bank!"

Boo Boo turns pale and begins to feel around in the drawer where he keeps his six-gun hid, him being kind of gun shy.

"Hopewell," he pants, "get yore shotgun quick!"

" 'Tis fate!" I say, and grab up the shotgun where it has stood in the corner ever since Soup Shannon borrowed it to go squirrel hunting. "Fate is givin' us a chance to be heroes!"

"I wouldn't want yuh to shoot Eagle Beak," Pop Pully says. "Especially with no shotgun. Just scare him—"

"Hopewell," Boo Boo shouts, "I do not believe in fate. I believe in action. Let us be moving along after this desperado!"

"Ain't no doubt about it," Pop says. "Eagle Beak is a dad-blasted desperado!"

Boo Boo and me head through the door at the same time, which is a mistake on account of Boo Boo's size. By the time we get untangled and out into the street, the owlhooter is gone and most of the Poleçatters are standing in the street, staring at the dust he has left behind.

"Everybody be calm," Boo Boo says between chattering teeth, "and let us talk the situation over. Mr. Lilly, how much did that desperado get?"

"Around six or seven hundred," old man Lilly wails.

"Tush, tush," Boo Boo says, wiping the sweat off his white face. "Now, let us see. He is going west. I reckon he might be headin' for the mountains. On t'other hand—"

"Boo Boo," a voice says with great sarcasm, "are yuh stallin' because you're scared? Or are yuh just too downright lazy to get a hoss an' follow that bank robber?"

BOO BOO and me look at the speaker, each of us feeling very unhappy. He is old man Bundy, editor of the Polecat *News,* and he is grinning out of one side of his mouth like he always does when he is about to get in somebody's hair.

Boo Boo draws himself up with great dignity.

"Me, the sheriff of Coyote County, scared? Lazy? Mr. Bundy, I resent yore accusations to the utmost and very heartily, and no mistake! I am a man of action an'—"

"I smell a story for my paper," Mr. Bundy says, still grinning. "If yuh don't catch that jasper, it will be a good story, too. And will you an' yore deputy smell in it!"

Just then Pop Pully comes hobbling up.

"That skunk I caught shore did smell," he says.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo roars, "why are yuh standin' there, doin' positively nothin'? Go saddle us two hosses so that we can be after that—"

"But don't hurry, Hopewell," Mr. Bundy cuts in. "Yuh would'nt want to catch up with that man, for he might take a shot at yuh."

"Best hound I ever had," Pop says. "Dratted Jnjun stole him an'—"

"Come, Hopewell," Boo Boo says. "So as not to waste no further time, I will help you saddle up."

"There ain't no use of hurryin'," I say as I follow him down the street. "Fate will decide if we are to catch that jasper or not."

"At a time like this, I am a man of action," he says, "not a believer in fate."

Just then a puff of wind catches up a piece of paper and flings it into my face. I grab the paper and see that it is nothing more or less than a brown paper bag with a faint smell of prunes about it.

"Fate," I say indignant, "cannot be

overlooked, no matter what you say. Which I will prove before the day is over. For some reason, fate has given me this paper bag. Why, I do not know, but I will put it in my pocket an'—"

"Hopewell," he says, "when we get back to town, remind me to hire myself a new deputy. One who is bright enough not to believe in such fool—"

"You do not have to hint but once," I say quickly, for the more I think of that skinny hombre with the six-gun, the more I do not like him. Besides I am a married man and have got responsibilities. "I resign immediately and right now."

"Yuh cannot quit and leave me cold at a time like this!" Boo Boo bellows. "Besides, what will your wife say if you do not have a job?"

His is the voice of fate speaking, and no mistake. A man with a wife has got to think twice before he goes home without a job. Even if the job may make her a widow. Especially if you have a wife like mine.

We went into the shed behind the jail where we keep our hosses.

"I will not mention fate no more," I promise, swinging the saddle upon my paint, "but nevertheless—"

"Shut up!" he says. "Let us save our breath for action—and help me into the saddle."

We ride out into the street, and Boo Boo waves his hand to the staring people, and shouts, "Just keep calm, men. Boo Boo Bounce ain't never missed gettin' his man as yet."

This is more or less the truth, for no bank robber had ever bothered about stopping in at the Polecat bank before.

"Hooray for Sheriff Bounce!" I say, waving my shotgun over my head.

"Hooray, my eye!" Mr. Bundy says sourly, but this we ignore and ride west, following the trail of the bank robber, which is as easy to see as a baby's first tooth.

I lead the way for I am an old hand at trailing, having spent many happy years of hunting before I got married. Boo Boo joggles along, bringing up the rear and making nasty remarks about bank robbers picking such a hot day to do their robbing.

Suddenly I see something which makes me pull my paint up short.

"Sheriff," I say, pointing a finger in the general direction of the ground, "fate has stepped in again, believe it or no. Our man's hoss has lost a shoe."

Boo Boo stares at the shoe, which gleams in the sun.

"How do yuh know his hoss throwed it?" he asks.

"That is as simple as goose grease is slick," I say. "You can tell by looking at the tracks that go on from here."

"Maybe so," he agrees reluctantly, "but that ain't no sign fate has got somethin' to do with it. It was just a poor job of hoss shoein'."

"You," I say coldly, "are about the most stubborn critter that I have met up with, exceptin' my wife."

WE RIDE on in deep silence, me studying the tracks. "Oh, oh," I say, "his hoss has begun to limp here. That has slowed him down, givin' us a chance to catch up with him. Also, you will notice that our man is turning north. No doubt, his lame hoss has made him decide to ride into Spruce Canyon to rest up a spell."

Boo Boo glares at me, his three chins quivering.

"That is some more of your fate, no doubt," he says. "The floor of Spruce Canyon is nothing but rocks for some miles. Our man will leave no more of a trail there than a worm crawling over a steel rail."

"Of course, it is fate," I say. "So I guess we might as well turn around and go back home."

"Home?" Boo Boo uses some very strong language. "We cannot go home yet, or Mr. Bundy will give us the hoss

laugh in his news-sheet. We have got to ride into the canyon and do the best we can, looking for this desperado."

"There are four million places where he could hide," I remind him.

"Nevertheless, we will go into the canyon," Boo Boo says. Then his face brightens somewhat. "There is a deserted cabin near the creek where we can spend the night in no little comfort. In the morning, we will return home and tell how we looked everywhere all night, but did not find our man."

"Yes," I agree, "a man cannot be blamed for doing his utmost best. Except by a dirt tosser like Mr. Bundy."

Boo Boo draws a quick breath, and I am afraid for a moment he will explode. However, he does nothing more than call Mr. Bundy a name. Then he adds, "Hopewell, let us not have to remind yuh that fate is to be left out of the conversation from now on. Also, Mr. Bundy."

"Yes, sir," I say, for I see that Boo Boo is not only mad, but also tired, hot and uncomfortable, which makes him somewhat dangerous.

Once we get into Spruce Canyon, we follow the west wall, for that puts us in the shade, which is cooler than the sun. Boo Boo takes off his hat and polishes his bald head with a red bandanna.

"Hopewell," he says, "this cabin is very, very close to the creek. The minute we get there, I will kick off my boots and put my feet in the water. There is nothing like having your feet in cool water on a hot day to calm yore nerves."

"While you are doing that," I say, "I will shoot a rabbit or two, and we will eat very handsome. I am glad that fate led our man into the canyon, even if—"

Boo Boo looks at me darkly, but now he is not so hot, so he says nothing. We round a sharp bend and come to the spruce timber which the canyon gets its name from.

[*Turn page*]

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"We might pick up our man's trail here," I say very faintly. "That is, if fate is will—"

"First," he says coldly, "I will soak my feet in the creek, fate or no fate!"

In the distance, I hear a dog bark, but at the time I do not think nothing much about it, for I am trying to keep my mind off the way fate does things.

"Ah," Boo Boo says, a smile coming to his fat face, "smell the cool of the forest green? Hear the birds—"

"Boo Boo," I say, "ain't that the cabin you mentioned straight ahead beyond them trees?"

"Yes, so it is," he says. "An' nearby is the cool creek."

"There is smoke coming out of the chimney," I say, stopping my hoss behind a thick growth of trees.

Boo Boo frowns at the smoke and shakes his head.

"I do not quite like this," he says. "Somebody has beat us here, an' we may not be so welcome. On the other hand—"

At that moment, who should come walking out of the cabin door but the same skinny jasper who robbed old man Lilly's bank. He has a frying pan in his hand, and he flips something out of it which might be a bad egg, or something he has burnt. Without so much as glancing in our direction, he goes back into the cabin just like he figured he was perfectly safe.

"He stopped here to let his hoss rest," I croak.

I cast a glance at Boo Boo. His eyes are as big as duck eggs, and he is trembling very much.

"Hopewell," he says hoarsely, "get yore shotgun ready."

I pull back both hammers. "Sheriff, it is ready," I say. "Lead on."

"Now, keep yore shirt on," he says hoarsely, backing his hoss up even with mine. "With a scatter gun, you can be more shore to hit that varmint. Yuh lead the way, deputy."

"But," I protest, "I have only two shots, while yore six-gun has—"

AND then I think of something that kind of staggers me. "Boo Boo," I say faintly, "I let Soup Shannon use this gun to hunt squirrels. Soup is no hand to leave any shells in any gun he borrows."

I break the gun and take a look. It is as empty as a saddlebum's pocketbook.

"Also," I go on unhappy like, "you hurried me so I forgot to put any shells in my pocket. Boo Boo, it looks like it is up to you and yore .44."

"Deputy," he says, "far be it from me to steal the honor and glory from you. Here, take my six an' go an' get our desperado."

He unleathers his .44 careful like, for he is always afraid it will go off, and holds it toward me.

"Sheriff," I say, "come to think of it, I don't remember you loading up. Since you never leave a loaded gun around—"

"Hopewell," he says hoarsely, "not only did I not load my gun, but I didn't bring any shells along also."

"Fate—" I begin, but he cuts me short with, "Hopewell, should Mr. Bundy learn about this, we will not get as many as four votes at election time. In short, we are sunk no little. Also, let us not consider fate as having a hand in this. Let us chalk it up to yore dumbness for letting Soup borrow—"

"It is not altogether my fault," I return hotly. "Soup did not borrow your .44."

"Let us not fuss about small details," he says. "Personally I do not hanker to be so close to a desperado when I am without ammunition."

I crane my neck to look at the cabin and feel goose pimples breaking out here and yon on me. When I look at Boo Boo again, I see he is riding away through the trees. I follow, and after

a time we come to the edge of the timber. Here we see a man setting in the shade, staring up into a lightning-split spruce, and we hear a loud buzzing. The man is old Eagle Beak and he is eyeing a swarm of bees which has come out of the split tree.

When we ride on toward him, we see a fat yellow hound setting close beside the Injun. Then we notice a string running from the hound's collar to Eagle Beak's fingers.

"Why, the old cuss!" Boo Boo says. "Shore as shootin', he did steal Pop Pully's hound. If that ain't Mint Julep, I'll—"

Mint Julep lifts his head and growls at us. Eagle Beak looks up. Worry fills his wrinkled face, and quickly he drops the string.

"How," he greets us no little unfriendly.

"So yuh're a dog snatcher!" Boo Boo snarls.

Eagle Beak shakes his head violently.

"No stealum dog," he says. "Dog followum."

"Yeah?" Boo Boo says, resting a hand on his empty .44.

"Eagle Beak tellum sheriff truth," the Injun says. "Eagle Beak watchum bees. Never seeum hound till this minute."

"Ain't you afraid of them bees?" I ask.

"Bees Eagle Beak's friends," he answers. "Bees never stingum Injun. No stealum hound dog!"

"Looks like I'll have to take yuh to jail," Boo Boo says. "Next to hoss stealin', dog stealin' is one of the worst—"

"Fate," I say excitedly, "has stepped in again!"

"Hopewell," Boo Boo roars, "you are fired!"

"Eagle Beak," I say, ignoring Boo Boo and pulling the brown paper prune

[*Turn page*]

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bag out of my pocket, "I want to play a small joke on a friend of mine who is staying in that old cabin down by the creek. I want you to fill this paper bag with bees, take it to that cabin and throw it in through the door."

Eagle Beak shakes his head. "Too big a joke," he says. "Yore friend likely shootum Injun dead."

Boo Boo's eyes widened, and slowly it begins to sink in.

"Hopewell," he says, "besides being a smart man, yuh're hired back as my deputy." Then he glares at Eagle Beak. "How'd yuh like to spend twenty years in jail for stealin' Pop Pully's dog? Now, if you was to do like Hopewell asks, we might let yuh go free."

"Also," I add, "we might let you keep Pop's hound. A mighty fat hound, too. Would make you a lot of good stew."

EAGLE BEAK studies the swarm of bees, which has settled on a bush near the tree. Then he looks Mint Julep over and feels his fat ribs.

"Ugg!" he says.

"My friend won't suspect a thing, seein' a Injun walk up to the cabin with a paper sack in his hand," I say. "After you throw the sack into the cabin, he'll be so busy with them bees, he won't have no time to shoot you."

"Exactly!" Boo Boo says. "Twenty years in jail is a long time. Besides that yellow hound is mighty fat."

"Ugg!" Eagle Beak says again.

He gets to his feet, takes the paper bag and walks over to the swarm of bees. Boo Boo and me get all set to vamoose just in case them bees do not relish being put in a sack. But Eagle Beak knows how to handle them hot-seated rascals, and in no time what-so-ever he has a nice sackful of them corraled. Then he takes a strip of bark and ties it around the mouth of the sack.

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"Me playum joke," he says, his wrinkled face cracking into a wicked grin.

He climbs on a bony old hoss, whistles to Mint Julep and heads through the spruce timber.

Boo Boo and I start to follow, when Boo Boo jerks his hoss to a stop, and says, "Oh, oh!"

"Oh, oh, what?" I ask.

"Ain't no doubt about them bees runnin' that owlhooter out into the open," he says, "but still we ain't got no ammunition to capture him with."

"The only ammunition we need is my lariat," I tell him. "Here is how things will work out. When that paper bag hits the floor and comes open and them bees start in on our man, he'll head for the creek. He'll jump into the water head first and get his ammunition wet. He can't climb out on the other side because the creek's right up against the

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canyon wall. So we will be waiting for him when he climbs out on our side. I will set my lariat over his shoulders, and you will bat him over the head with the shotgun. It is duck soup no little."

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says admiringly, "without yuh I would be as helpless as a ant in a ripe watermelon. Without doubt, yuh are smart enough to be president of the United States with Texas throwed in to boot. Let us follow Eagle Beak and be on hand for the kill."

So we follow Eagle Beak and Mint Julep at a safe distance. It is getting along toward sundown when we come in sight of the clearing. Eagle Beak slides from his hoss, paper bag in one hand, and stands there looking like he is about to change his mind.

"Yuh might get thirty years instead of twenty!" Boo Boo hisses.

"Ugg!" Eagle Beak says, and heads through the clearing on foot toward the cabin, leading Mint Julep by the string.

Boo Boo and me, keeping out of sight, go down to the creek and hide behind some bushes. I have my lariat coiled and ready. We peek out from behind the bushes and watch Eagle Beak with our fingers crossed. You can never tell about bank robbers. Even an old Injun might not be safe with one.

No doubt but fate is with us, for nothing happens to Eagle Beak as he walks across the clearing. He pads right up to the door, takes hold of the latch and lifts it careful-like. The door is evidently locked, for he doesn't get it open. But he is not one to give up easy. He eases around to a window, which is open, lets out a war-whoop, throws the paper bag through the window, turns and runs for the timber. This is too much for the string fastened to Mint Julep, for it breaks, and Pop's yellow hound sets down to scratch a flea.

Right away, things begin to happen inside the cabin. Such language that

comes through that open window you never before hear, and then some. This owlhooter don't bother about unlocking the door, or opening it. He comes through the door while it is still shut, tearing it loose from the hinges. With him are a few thousand bees.

As he runs, he yells and swears something fierce, and he heads for the creek just like I predict. He is so busy fighting bees he does not see Boo Boo and me and my lariat. He piles into the creek feet first and goes under like a chunk of lead with a great splash. The bees are somewhat confused, and circle about for a short while, before flying back toward the cabin, looking for another victim.

OUR man comes up, emitting water like a squeezed sponge. He starts swimming toward the bank when suddenly he sees us. His eyes kind of pop, and he reaches under water for his gun. But he realizes that a water soaked gun is hardly worth pulling from the leather, so he starts to swim down stream.

Boo Boo yanks out his empty .44 and points it at our man, while I swing my lariat and make ready to drop it over the desperado's shoulders.

"Come this way," Boo Boo yells, "or I will shoot to kill!"

The owlhooter hesitates only a moment; then he comes our way. He is on the short end of things and knows it. I see Boo Boo trembling, but do not worry, for I figure that with my lariat around this hombre's shoulders and arms, he will not be able to put up much of a fight.

Just as he gets his feet on the creek bottom and stands up, and I start to make one last swing with the lariat, we hear a frightful yelping that would make a dead man set up and listen. I glance back over my shoulder, and what I see kind of petrifies me. There comes

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Boo Boo's mouth flies open, but otherwise he fails to move. Mint Julep figures the shortest distance between himself and the creek is a straight line, which happens to go right between Boo Boo's fat legs. About half them bees forget about Mint Julep and start to work on Boo Boo. The other half take one look at my swinging lariat and decide they don't like me because I am still swinging it.

I hear Boo Boo let out a squawk, and then there is a great splash. At that moment, a bee drills me on the end of my nose, and a few hundred others make ready to follow his example. I let go of the rope and join Mint Julep and Boo Boo in the creek.

There is nothing like cold water to discourage bees. I stay under until I feel that my lungs are on fire, and a little longer. Then when I come up for air, I stick out only my nose, and immediately dive again as soon as I get a breath. After doing this a number of times, I feel it is safe to come up and look the situation over, which I do.

I see Mint Julep scrambling up the bank, shaking the water off himself. I turn slightly, and there is Boo Boo sticking his head up. He looks somewhat unfamiliar because of the bee stings on his face. I continue to look about. The bees are gone, I see, and so is our bank robber.

Boo Boo and I climb out on the bank and flop down to rest.

"Yore idea," he says coldly, "of how to catch a bank robber was a dilly, and no mistake. Consider yourself no longer the deputy of Coyote County."

"The idea was good," I said stoutly. "If fate hadn't of stepped in, all would have gone well. But there's never no telling about fate."

"Hogwash!" he snorts. "Let us not consider such a thing as fate. Let us say instead that yuh are the dumbest deputy—"

"How can you say that?" I ask indignant, "when it is plain that fate has been following us all day. Eagle Beak stealing Mint Julep. That paper bag blowing into my face. The desperado's hoss losing a shoe and going lame so he has to stop at the cabin. Them bees swarming. Then taking after Mint Julep. You cannot beat a setup like that for—"

"Hopewell," he says, "I will absolutely bust you over the head with my .44 if you do not shut up about—"

THERE is a sound of something coming through the brush, and we set up and feel the cold sweat break out on our faces, for you never know what fate might shove at you on a day like this. The bushes part, and out steps Eagle Beak, and he is dragging something.

Boo Boo and I get to our feet and see that what Eagle Beak is dragging toward us is no more or less than the tall skinny owlhooter, who offers no resistance whatsoever.

"Injun findum deputy's friend washed up on bank," Eagle Beak says. "Him little-bit watersoaked, but not dead."

Eagle Beak lets go of the skinny jasper, and he rolls over and blinks up at us. He is very meek, and no mistake, besides being entirely exhausted.

Boo Boo's chins quiver, and for some time he is at a loss for words. All the while, I am gloating, for there can be no doubt but what fate has decided that we should capture the bank robber, thus making us the heroes of Coyote County. Being the heroes of Coyote County, the next election is in the bag without doubt. I consider mentioning these things to Boo Boo, but I am no hand to say, "I

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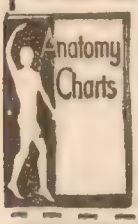

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told you so!" so I say nothing.

Then Eagle Beak clears his throat and says, "Ugg!"

"What're yuh 'ugging' about?" I ask.

"No can find yellow dog," he says.

Boo Boo comes to life then and pulls a silver dollar from his pocket.

"Here," he says, "is a dollar for savin' Hopewell's friend's life. Take it an' buy yoreself a flock of dogs."

Eagle Beak tests the dollar with his teeth, and a pleased look comes to his wrinkled face. He gets to his feet and stalks off through the timber to where he's left his hoss. . . .

It is the next day, and I am setting in the jail office with my feet on a waste basket, while Boo Boo Bounce is setting with his feet on the desk. Both of us are reading in the Polecat *News* about what good lawmen we are, us catching the bank robber and getting back all the money, when there comes a knock at our door.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says, "see who it is knocking."

I go to the door, and there is Pop Pully, smelling no better than he did the day before.

"Leave the door open," Boo Boo says, which I do.

Pop comes in, and you can see he is very happy under all his whiskers about something.

"What's on yore mind?" Boo Boo says.

"Find?" Pop says. "Why I found my yellow hound. Didn't exactly find him,

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neither. He come home last night. Looked like he got mixed up with some bees. I reckon Eagle Beak didn't steal him after all. Reckon Mint Julep just went visitin' someplace for a day."

"I told yuh Eagle Beak warn't no thief," Boo Boo yells.

"Yep, my grief's over," Pop says. "Heared somebody robbed the bank yesterday. Why ain't you boys out lookin' for the robber instead of settin' here. Reckon Coyote County needs a new sheriff an' deputy."

With that, he turns and walks out on us.

Boo Boo looks at me, and I look at him.

"Pop Pully never votes nohow," I say.

But Boo Boo does not seem to hear this, for I see that his mind is utterly occupied with other matters.

"Hopewell," he says in a awed voice, " 'tis fate, and no mistake. Us catching the bank robber an' Pop gettin' his hound back. Which reminds me, yuh owe me a dollar for the one I give Eagle Beak for savin' the life of your friend, the bank robber."

"Hold on," I say. "That jasper is no friend of—"

" 'Tis fate," he says again, holding out a fat hand. "Fork over the dollar, or I will take it out of yore next month's salary, and then your wife will snort when she sees your check is short!"

I give him a dollar, for there is no way you can dodge fate, no matter how hard you try, and no mistake about it.

NEXT ISSUE

PERFECT DAZE, AND NO MISTAKE

Another Boo Boo Bounce Story

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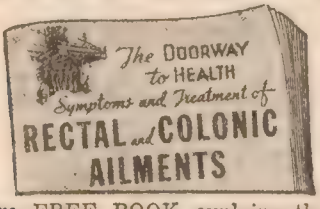

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 8)

you can look up at cliffs that rise for three thousand feet, and then suddenly the gorge widens and you look down a long valley that is six or seven miles wide and fifty miles long!"

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Boots And Saddle

A long novelet in the same issue is RIFLES FOR THE APACHES, a stirring tale of army life on the plains by Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson. The Major is well known to Western readers for his authentic portraits of the blue-clad cavalry which battled the Indian tribes across a dozen states. An old army man himself, author Wheeler-Nicholson knows intimately the kind of men who made up that tough and reckless crew of fighters.

The Army of the West was a stepchild of Congress. Short of men, short of supplies, even short of rifles, a thin and hopeless shadow of a real army, it was expected to police a vast area bigger than Europe and it was villified and condemned in all the papers as soon as something went wrong.

To pin down the Apaches alone would have taken more than Sheridan ever had at one time. And it was only the knowledge of the hopeless task, the very bitter, reckless don't-care-what-happens feeling of officers and men that made them perform the miracles of soldiery they did.

At least it was so with Lieutenant Rowan. He knew all about grafting

Indian agents, crooked politicians in Washington, white renegades supplying the Indians with arms to use against their own kind, professional sympathizers with the Indian, Congressmen cutting appropriations and all the rest of the miserable, tangled mess.

But he had also seen Apache work. He had ridden, with two civilian scouts, up to the stage station run by Dan Eubanks, to find raw, red horror. The cabin was a smouldering mass of ashes. Eubanks scalped and mutilated, lay near the cabin door where he had been killed as he ran out with a rifle in his hands. Nearby lay the body of Mrs. Eubanks. At the back of the house was the hired girl, covered with the projecting, feathered ends of arrows. Near her were the three Eubanks children, a boy of three and two girls of five and six, crumpled like rag dolls. This was Apache work.

And this was the kind of thing that made professional soldiers like Rowan stick to their job in spite of bad pay, worse living conditions and the calculated abuse and heartbreak of army life.

"I'm sending you on a special detail, Mister Rowan!" the colonel told him. The colonel sputtered like a box of firecrackers, but Rowan knew all about the heart of gold under the noisy exterior.

"Mister Rowan, that four-eyed intellectual marvel, that skinny drink of water, that Lieutenant Sladen or Slaven or Silver, commanding C Troop—I don't know what the devil he is up to or what he's trying to prove, but I want to find out, d'you hear? There are too many good, new Henry rifles coming through that section and going to the Apaches, while we have a condemned, obsolete lot of ancient single-shot Sharp carbines!"

The colonel glared at Rowan as though it were his fault.

"There's enough Henry rifles across the river to set this whole Territory ablaze. I don't want any more massacres. And here I sit with my hands tied and only one officer with enough sense to go out and find out what is taking place. Draw an enlisted man's uniform from the stores and get the blazes out of here as fast as you can. You've got only forty-eight hours to stop this thing!"

So Lieutenant Rowan, temporarily

[*Turn page*]

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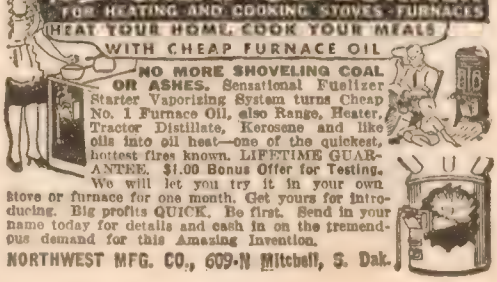

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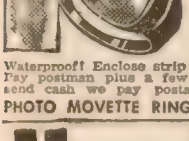

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Private Jones, reported to Top Sergeant Schmidt of Lieutenant Sladen's Troop. And promptly got into a fight with that tough character, to the horror of the intellectual lieutenant, who thought it was brutal. But you'll think it's terrific, and we'll bet on it. RIFLES FOR THE APACHES is a bit of exciting, authentic West, one of its many colorful phases, which, like patches in a crazy-quilt, made up the assorted patterns that was its way of life.

"Just Plain Foolin' "

Which brings us logically to another important phase of Western life and that deals with humor as exemplified by another story in this same issue of GIANT WESTERN. This is PERFECT DAZE AND NO MISTAKE, by Ben Frank.

In the many grim and gory tales of the frontier, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that the cowboy was essentially an easy-going, friendly soul, full of gusty, if sometimes primitive humor.

Practical jokes and "just plain foolin' " were integral parts of his make-up. Some of these men would go to the most elaborate lengths to set the stage for a practical joke.

Ben Frank's story is the universal one of human beings baffled by the stubborn material things of their environment—to put it bluntly, the story of a lazy man trying to get out of doing some work.

People being what they are, this happened as frequently in the West as anywhere else, perhaps more so, since there was more work to be done. At any rate, when Hopewell's wife wanted him to spade the garden, Hopewell suddenly remembered that he was a deputy sheriff of Coyote County, with a duty to perform to the fine citizens who put their faith in him.

So while his wife's mouth was still slightly agape and she was bringing up the next word, Hopewell made a dash for the door and being a reasonably fast runner, was almost out of ear-shot before she could yell to him—which she didn't, being too much of a lady.

Slightly out of breath, Hopewell reached the office to find Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce sitting very snug in his easy chair with his eyes shut and a large smile on his fat, red face.

"Hopewell," said Boo Boo, "quote, 'What is so rare as a day in June,' unquote." He opened one eye to look at his deputy. "Hopewell," he said, "leave us not be rattling the morning paper thusly, for on a perfect day like this here is about to be, I prefer a very quiet quiet."

A Vacation, But—

Presently he opened both eyes. "On second thought, deputy, in order to insure myself that on this perfect day there will be no further disturbance, I hereby give yuh a vacation. Good-by and do not return till tomorrow."

This was very generous of Boo Boo, but there were sudden complications in the way.

"If I take a vacation," Hopewell pointed out, "I will find myself on the end of a shovel in my wife's garden."

"Go fishing."

Hopewell shook his head. "Should I go fishing and should my wife learn of such—"

"Leave us put it another way then. Go down to the fishing hole and see that nobody is violating the law by swimming in said hole. While yuh are there, yuh might as well fish."

And that started the whole thing. Hopewell rode to the fishing hole, picking up a character named Chicky-Choo Crump on the way. And there in the fishing hole is a man, swimming. Filled with virtuous indignation, Hopewell arrested the man and brought him back to jail, to the annoyance of Boo Boo Bounce, who wanted only peace and quiet.

A Tiger by the Tail

But Hopewell and Boo Boo had a

[*Turn page*]

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tiger by the tail, though little did they know it, and the route the tiger dragged them was rough and thorny indeed. At one point Hopewell and Boo Boo found themselves without a stitch of clothes on, an indignant female in a buckboard covering her eyes with her hands and only the rough and scratchy brush offering sanctuary for their gentlemanly modesty.

There are laughs in PERFECT DAZE AND NO MISTAKE and there is a side of the West that should be written more often—the story of ordinary folks, the fat and thin, the wise and foolish, the kind and the shrewish.

A True Fact Story

And still another patch on our quilt of many colors—another true fact story about some of the legendary figures of the old West: THE WARRIORS OF THE CANADIAN, by Frederick R. Bechdolt.

You'll find THE WARRIORS OF THE PECOS by the same author in this issue of GIANT WESTERN and you'll remember Fred Bechdolt as one of the finest writers of Western stories ever to put a hand to the typewriter. He is also famed as a historian and student.

In this issue, WARRIORS OF THE PECOS deals brilliantly with the famed Lincoln County war which made the reputation of Billy the Kid. But what happened to the Kid after the end, when MacSwain was killed and nearly all his men wiped out? There is something of a gap in many histories dealing with this in-between period before Pat Garrett took up the long trail which was to end at last in the Kid's death. Mr. Bechdolt picks up the story where he left it in WARRIORS OF THE PECOS and carries on with WARRIORS OF THE CANADIAN.

Familiar names appear in this chronicle: Jim East, Charley Siringo, Bob Robertson, Cal Polk, Lon Chambers, Tom Emory, Lee Hall, Frank Clifford, Bob Williams, Louis Bozeman and the rest. And of course there were the two who rode with Billy the Kid: Charley Bowdre and Tom O'Phalliard.

The Urge for Adventure

The ranchers of Tascosa, typified by Jim East, had no bones to pick with

Billy the Kid and his two saddlemates. They'd heard of the Lincoln County war, but right and wrong were so mixed in that bloody feud that few men took sides. Billy the Kid and his men were welcome enough in Tascosa so long as they behaved. And in truth, they behaved well enough so that a warm friendship sprang up between the outlaws and the ranchers. They were all young men, they were all filled with the wild blood of restless adventure and the line which divided an honest man from an outlaw was often a wavering one.

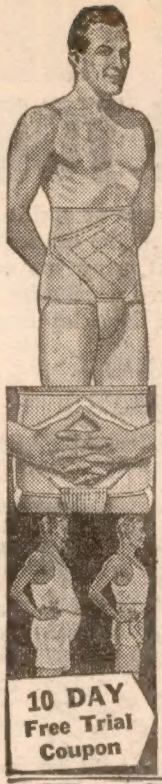
Jim East liked Billy the Kid and his two partners. But when they found that the three had rustled several hundred of their best steers, the picture changed. The ranchers swiftly organized against the very men they had liked so well, and a posse rode forth to find them.

This missing chapter in the saga of the West's most notorious killer, the boy who at 21, had killed 21 men, not counting Indians or Mexicans, is a fascinating story, as true history so often is. We consider these Bechdolt pieces a solid addition to GIANT WESTERN and would enjoy hearing how our readers feel about them.

Write us, in fact, about the entire magazine, after you've had a chance to digest this first issue. We think it's the best and biggest thing yet in Western magazines, but we're not looking for bouquets—we would appreciate honest opinions, suggestions for authors or special things you'd like to see in the magazine. Any suggestion of merit will receive careful attention. Just address your letter—or a postcard will do—to The Editor, GIANT WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y.

Thank you!

—THE RAMROD.



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